

- Mortality / Frozen foods

Risk of premature death seen in consumption of ultra-processed foods

South China Morning Post · 23 Nov 2022 · B9

Consumption of ultra-processed, ready-to-eat foods like hot dogs, frozen pizzas and doughnuts may lead to premature death, researchers found in a recently published study. The findings were published in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine.



Ultra-processed foods had long been associated with an increased risk of diseases like diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and cancer, the researchers said. They wanted to take things a step further and see how the foods may be linked to premature death.

To find out, they did a comparative risk assessment, or a simulation of the impact of a risk factor on health, said lead author Eduardo Nilson from the University of Sao Paulo in Brazil.

Based on their model and calculations, ultra-processed foods made up 13 per cent to 21 per cent of the energy intake of Brazilian adults.

In 2019, more than 500,000 adult Brazilians aged 30 to 69 died. The consumption of ultra-processed foods was responsible for about 57,000 premature deaths among that group, or 10.5 per cent, they calculated.

The team was conservative in its estimations, so the impact could be much higher, Nilson said.

“It is a public health issue,” he said. “What we’re facing in Brazil is a steady, gradual increase in the consumption of ultra-processed foods. In the US, I think it’s actually more stabilised over time, but very high already.”

What is ultra-processed food?

Ultra-processed food is industrialised, “ready to eat”, Nilson said. It often has very few fresh ingredients and lots of starches, processed proteins and food additives.

“It’s very different from what we have in our kitchens, when will you mix foods from scratch,” Nilson said. “They’re intended to be overconsumed and have a long shelf life, and normally are cheap to produce.”

These foods are often consumed most by people from low-income communities because they’re worried about how much they can afford.

Processed foods are cheaper than fresh foods and more accessible.

Cutting back would make a difference

The team estimated what would happen to the Brazilian population if people ate less ultra-processed food. A 20 per cent reduction would put the country’s consumption of ultraprocessed foods back to where it was 10 years ago, Nilson said.

“It’s not far in the past,” he said. “57,000 deaths could be prevented. We need ... policies [urgently] to reduce the consumption of processed foods and increase healthier foods, which are fresh and minimally processed.”

A right to healthy food

It’s not fair to blame people for their food choices, he said.

“There’s a lot of inequity in the populations ... the increase in ultra-processed foods in Brazil is mainly (among) the poorest people in the country because they have limited access to healthy foods.”

The same thing is seen in the US and other countries where immigrant populations have less access to healthy foods, he said.

“That should be addressed because people have a right to ... to adequate foods and healthy foods.”

Preventing premature mortality

Nilson said his team’s study was the first to model the impact of ultraprocessed foods on premature deaths. Previous research had looked at the impact of nutrients like sodium, some sugars, trans fats and saturated fats.

The researchers said their model could help policymakers understand how dietary patterns affected mortality. Policymakers could use these findings to come up with ways to combat premature mortality.

Nilson also said reducing ultraprocessed food would come at a price. Reducing sugars, for example, could lead to more artificial sweeteners. That’s why it was important for governments to make sure dietary guidelines were based on food and dietary patterns, not just nutrients.