

- Convenience foods

## True danger of ultra-processed foods

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FROM instant noodles to chicken nuggets, bread products, soda and more, ultra-processed foods are both numerous and diverse, finding favour with consumers for their practicality and tastiness. However, one scientific study after another highlights the potential dangers they pose to physical and mental health. The latest such research even suggests that these foods may be linked to a higher risk of early death.



Before looking at the conclusions of this 30-year study, it's worth clarifying what ultra-processed foods actually are. Focusing exclusively on industrial processing, there are three types of food: those that have undergone no, or very little, processing, which are sometimes called raw foods, i.e. fresh fruit and vegetables, eggs, meat or fish; those that have been made from raw foods with a small amount of processing, ie, fresh bread, fruit purées, canned vegetables, or artisanal cheeses; and then those that have undergone further processing via industrial products and additives to improve their taste and shelf life.

Foods in this last category are considered ultra-processed foods, and they can take the form of chicken nuggets, sodas or even instant noodles. And these foods have been the focus of attention in recent years among scientists, health professionals and health authorities because of the risks they may pose to consumers, particularly over the long term.

Not only have they been found to increase the risk of being obese or overweight, as well as of associated diseases, ultra-processed foods are also thought to be associated with an increased risk of cancer, heart disease and even depression symptoms.

### 'SLIGHTLY HIGHER' RISK OF DEATH

A new study goes even further, suggesting that this type of food may be linked to a higher risk of premature death. This finding was established by a team of researchers after following no fewer than 74,563 female nurses from 11 US states as part of the Nurses' Health Study, between 1984 and 2018, and 39,501 male healthcare professionals from 50 US

states, as part of the Health Professionals Follow-up Study, between 1986 and 2018. Participants had no history of cancer, cardiovascular disease or diabetes when they enrolled. Published in 'The British Medical Journal', this research reveals that high consumption of ultra-processed foods is associated with a "slightly higher" risk of death. Specifically, participants consuming the most ultra-processed foods — an average of seven servings per day — had a four per cent higher all-cause mortality compared to those eating an average of three servings per day. Mortality was nine per cent higher for causes other than cancer and cardiovascular disease, including an eight per cent higher risk of death from neurodegenerative diseases. However, "no associations were found for deaths due to cardiovascular diseases, cancer, or respiratory diseases", the researchers explain in a news release.

#### TRY COOKING FROM SCRATCH

The strongest and most consistent associations with higher mortality were found with meat, poultry, and seafood based ready-to-eat products, followed by sweetened and artificially sweetened drinks, dairy-based desserts and ultra-processed breakfast foods.

"The findings provide support for limiting consumption of certain types of ultra-processed food for long-term health," the researchers say.

"Future studies are warranted to improve the classification of ultraprocessed foods and confirm our findings in other populations," they conclude.

One way to limit your consumption of ultra-processed foods is to cook from scratch with fresh seasonal produce, unprocessed canned or frozen foods, such as plain vegetables or fish fillets. Prioritising homemade meals can significantly reduce your consumption of products that have undergone industrial processing. A study from October 2023 revealed that one in seven adults worldwide may be addicted to ultra-processed foods.