

Ultra-Processed Food Linked to Higher Cancer Risk

People who consumed highly processed food had a greater risk for ovarian and brain cancers and higher cancer mortality.

April 10, 2023 By [Sukanya Charuchandra](#)

Eating larger proportions of ultra-processed food can greatly increase the risk of cancer and cancer-related death, according to study findings published in [eClinicalMedicine](#).

Ready-to-eat and cheap meals have grown increasingly popular due to their accessibility and low cost. But these foods are most likely to be heavily processed. “Ultra-processed foods are produced with industrially derived ingredients and often use food additives to adjust color, flavor, consistency, texture or extend shelf life,” Kiara Chang, PhD, a researcher at Imperial College London, said in a [press release](#).

Previous research has [shown a link](#) between eating ultra-processed food and the risk for colon cancer. But the association between heavily processed food, the development of cancer and resulting death is not fully understood.

Chang and colleagues explored the link between ultra-processed food, cancer risk and cancer-related death for 34 cancer types. The study population included 197,426 British adults between ages 40 and 69; 55% were women. All participants completed a 24-hour diet recall assessment between 2009 and 2012 and were followed through January 2021.

Foods consumed were grouped according to the extent of processing. Ultra-processed foods include fizzy drinks, factory-made bread, ready-to-eat meals, breakfast cereal and many other common items. These foods often contain large amounts of salt, sugar and fat, and eating such food has been linked to obesity, type 2 diabetes and heart disease.

On average, 23% of the participants’ diets consisted of ultra-processed food. Over nearly 10 years of follow-up, a total of 15,921 people developed cancer, and there were 4,009 cancer-related deaths.

Overall, eating ultra-processed food was linked to a higher risk of developing cancer, especially ovarian and brain cancers. The risk for death from cancer, most notably ovarian and breast cancers, was also greater.

With every 10% increase in ultra-processed food in an individual's diet, the overall risk for cancer rose by 2%, while the risk for ovarian cancer rose by 19%. In addition, with every 10% increase, mortality from cancer overall, breast cancer and ovarian cancer rose by 6%, 16% and 30%, respectively.

These links persisted even after adjusting for dietary, behavioral and socioeconomic factors, including smoking. While these observational findings show a correlation between the consumption of ultra-processed food and cancer risk, more research is needed to demonstrate causation.

Clear and evident warnings for ultra-processed food are needed to help people make better choices, the researchers advised. "Although our study cannot prove causation, other available evidence shows that reducing ultra-processed foods in our diet could provide important health benefits," said senior study author Eszter Vamos, PhD. "Further research is needed to confirm these findings and understand the best public health strategies to reduce the widespread presence and harms of ultra-processed foods in our diet."

"Lower income households are particularly vulnerable to these cheap and unhealthy ultra-processed foods," Chang added. "Minimally processed and freshly prepared meals should be subsidized to ensure everyone has access to healthy, nutritious and affordable options."

Click here to read the study in [eClinicalMedicine](#).

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