# Nuanced approach to ultra-processed foods vital for health and climate goals



The ongoing discourse surrounding ultra-processed foods (UPFs) is intensifying, with many voices highlighting their potential consequences not only for personal health but also for the climate. Dr. Sarah Ison, global director of research at Madre Brava, asserts that the current narrative might inadvertently exacerbate climate change by simplifying a complex issue into a binary of good versus bad. While UPFs, which include a wide array of foods from sugary snacks to ready-made meals, have been linked to various health problems, the broader implications of their production and consumption for the environment are often overlooked.

The reality is stark: food systems contribute roughly one-third of global greenhouse gas emissions, with animal products responsible for about twice the emissions of plant-based options. This systemic challenge is compounded by the fact that high-income countries derive approximately 65% of their protein from animal sources, a figure significantly higher than in low-income nations, where plant-based sources often dominate. The overconsumption of animal products is linked not only to a rise in chronic health issues like obesity and diabetes but also to ecological concerns such as biodiversity loss and excessive water usage in agriculture.

Despite the polarising stigma attached to UPFs, it is crucial to establish a more nuanced understanding of plant-based alternatives. While meat analogues may be classified as ultra-processed due to their ingredient lists, they often offer a healthier nutritional profile compared to their meat counterparts, providing higher fibre content and lower levels of saturated fat. Recent systematic reviews have indicated that substituting conventional meat with plant-based options can yield significant health benefits, such as lower cholesterol levels and modest weight loss. Similarly, soy milk is associated with additional advantages, including improved cardiovascular health metrics. However, the constant barrage of conflicting information can leave consumers bewildered about the role of these products in a balanced diet.

Notably, there is a growing tension within the plant-based market as consumer interest appears to be waning, particularly for processed vegetarian options. A report highlighted Unilever's struggles with its plant-based meat brand, the Vegetarian Butcher, indicating a potential shift in consumer preferences amidst rising health awareness. This shift underscores the critical need for clear communication and labelling of food products, especially as the health implications of UPFs become more widely understood. Public health guidelines are increasingly advocating for plant proteins, such as beans and lentils, as alternatives to red and processed meats, thus reinforcing the importance of incorporating a variety of protein sources to mitigate health risks and environmental impacts.

While the dialogue around ultra-processed foods often tends to neglect their potential to positively influence dietary changes, it is essential to move beyond binary classifications. Instead, assessing the health benefits of plant-based meats and their role in reducing overall greenhouse gas emissions is imperative. Tackling misinformation and fostering informed discussions around dietary habits can empower consumers to make choices that benefit both their health and the planet.

As researchers continue to unravel the complex relationships between food processing, health, and the environment, the emphasis on responsible consumption practices becomes increasingly critical. The future of both individual health and climate resilience may hinge on our ability to glean insight from ongoing studies and adapt our diets towards more plant-based alternatives, without being clouded by over-simplified narratives.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.greenqueen.com.hk/ultra-processed-foods-plant-based-meat-climate-change-upf/), [[5]](https://www.ft.com/content/cf42fe94-d3be-46f5-b45e-1eed8b45dba9)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.greenqueen.com.hk/ultra-processed-foods-plant-based-meat-climate-change-upf/), [[2]](https://time.com/6123652/post-thanksgiving-diet-carbon-emissions/), [[4]](https://apnews.com/article/d6a9c6f0554f279497acb5714b3032b9)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://www.reuters.com/business/retail-consumer/unilever-faces-battle-reduce-plant-based-meat-exposure-2025-02-25/), [[6]](https://time.com/5601980/beyond-meat-ceo-ethan-brown-interview/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.greenqueen.com.hk/ultra-processed-foods-plant-based-meat-climate-change-upf/), [[2]](https://time.com/6123652/post-thanksgiving-diet-carbon-emissions/), [[4]](https://apnews.com/article/d6a9c6f0554f279497acb5714b3032b9)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.greenqueen.com.hk/ultra-processed-foods-plant-based-meat-climate-change-upf/), [[5]](https://www.ft.com/content/cf42fe94-d3be-46f5-b45e-1eed8b45dba9), [[7]](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/37803736/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.greenqueen.com.hk/ultra-processed-foods-plant-based-meat-climate-change-upf/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://time.com/6123652/post-thanksgiving-diet-carbon-emissions/> - This article discusses how minor dietary changes, such as reducing meat, dairy, and processed foods, can significantly lower greenhouse gas emissions. It highlights that meat-eaters' diets produce 59% more emissions compared to vegetarians and emphasizes the environmental benefits of focusing on plant-based foods.
3. <https://www.reuters.com/business/retail-consumer/unilever-faces-battle-reduce-plant-based-meat-exposure-2025-02-25/> - Unilever is struggling to attract buyers for its plant-based meat business, the Vegetarian Butcher, amid declining consumer interest in processed vegetarian products. The market's decline has led Unilever to consider selling the loss-making Vegetarian Butcher, which generates around €50 million in annual sales.
4. <https://apnews.com/article/d6a9c6f0554f279497acb5714b3032b9> - A panel of nutrition experts has advised Americans to consume more beans, peas, and lentils while reducing red and processed meats and starchy vegetables. The guidelines emphasize limiting added sugars, sodium, and saturated fats, aiming to improve public health and address diet-related chronic health conditions.
5. <https://www.ft.com/content/cf42fe94-d3be-46f5-b45e-1eed8b45dba9> - As festivities approach, consumers are becoming more aware of the harmful effects of ultra-processed foods (UPFs) due to dietitians and influencers. Studies link high UPF diets to increased risks of illnesses such as cancer, heart disease, obesity, and depression. Effective strategies require public awareness and clear labeling of UPFs.
6. <https://time.com/5601980/beyond-meat-ceo-ethan-brown-interview/> - Ethan Brown, the founder of Beyond Meat, discusses his journey from a childhood surrounded by livestock to creating plant-based meat alternatives. He highlights the environmental and health concerns of consuming animal meat, emphasizing the significant impact livestock has on climate change due to resource utilization and greenhouse gas emissions.
7. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/37803736/> - This study investigates the health effects of different processing degrees of plant-based meat in mice. It concludes that overprocessing reduces the benefits of plant-based meat, highlighting the need to improve processing methods and reduce additives used in these products.