# Study links ultra-processed food consumption to increased cancer risk in UK adults



A recent study conducted by researchers from Imperial College London has highlighted potential health risks associated with the consumption of ultra-processed foods, suggesting a link between these foods and an increased risk of cancer. The research focused on a range of commonly consumed items including sliced bread, breakfast cereals, fizzy drinks, and many ready meals, which are typically characterised by high levels of salt, fat, sugar, and artificial additives.

The study examined the dietary habits and health outcomes of 200,000 middle-aged adults in the UK over a ten-year period, utilising UK Biobank records. Researchers monitored the incidence of cancer development, investigating 34 different types, as well as cancer-related mortality. Results indicated a correlation between higher intake of ultra-processed foods and an increased risk of developing cancer overall. Specifically, the risk of ovarian and brain cancers was notably higher among individuals consuming greater quantities of such foods.

Furthermore, the study revealed that greater consumption of ultra-processed foods was associated with a higher likelihood of cancer-related deaths, with ovarian and breast cancers showing particular prominence. According to the findings, for every 10 per cent increase in the proportion of ultra-processed foods in the diet, the overall incidence of cancer rose by two per cent, while the incidence of ovarian cancer increased by 19 per cent.

Beyond cancer risk, the study also confirmed links between ultra-processed food consumption and other health issues such as obesity and type 2 diabetes in adults. Among UK children, increased consumption of these foods was associated with greater weight gain. These associations persisted even after adjusting for socio-economic, behavioural, and dietary factors including smoking status, physical activity levels, and body mass index.

Dr Kiara Chang, first author from Imperial College London’s School of Public Health, addressed the findings and concerns surrounding the UK's high levels of ultra-processed food consumption. “The average person in the UK consumes more than half of their daily energy intake from ultra-processed foods. This is exceptionally high and concerning as ultra-processed foods are produced with industrially derived ingredients and often use food additives to adjust colour, flavour, consistency, texture, or extend shelf life,” she explained.

Dr Chang emphasised the widespread presence and marketing of these products, noting their affordability and attractive packaging as factors that promote consumption. “Our bodies may not react the same way to these ultra-processed ingredients and additives as they do to fresh and nutritious minimally processed foods. However, ultra-processed foods are everywhere and highly marketed with cheap price and attractive packaging to promote consumption. This shows our food environment needs urgent reform to protect the population from ultra-processed foods,” she added.

The research team pointed out that consumption levels of ultra-processed foods in the UK are the highest in Europe among both adults and children, and highlighted a lack of current regulatory measures in the UK to address this issue. In contrast, some countries such as Brazil, France, and Canada have revised national dietary guidelines to recommend limiting ultra-processed food intake, with Brazil even banning the marketing of these foods in schools.

Dr Chang suggested several policy measures, including the introduction of clear front-of-pack warning labels for ultra-processed foods and extending the sugar tax to include fizzy drinks, fruit-based and milk-based drinks, and other ultra-processed products. She also noted the particular vulnerability of lower-income households to these inexpensive yet unhealthy foods and called for subsidies to make minimally processed and freshly prepared meals more accessible and affordable.

Lead author Dr Eszter Vamos from Imperial College London’s School of Public Health underscored the broader health implications of the findings. “This study adds to the growing evidence that ultra-processed foods are likely to negatively impact our health including our risk for cancer. Given the high levels of consumption in UK adults and children, this has important implications for future health outcomes,” she said. Dr Vamos also clarified that while the study does not establish causation, the existing evidence suggests that reducing ultra-processed food intake could offer significant health benefits, and highlighted the need for further research to confirm these findings and inform public health strategies.

The study has been published in the journal EClinicalMedicine and contributes to the ongoing discussion around diet, health risks, and food environment in the UK and internationally.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

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2. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/36880051/> - Supports the methodology and results of the study analyzing associations between ultra-processed food consumption and 34 site-specific cancers in a large UK cohort.
3. <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2023/01/230131183131.htm> - Confirms the reported 19% increased ovarian cancer risk per 10% dietary increase in ultra-processed foods and links to obesity/type 2 diabetes.
4. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/36889863/> - Provides additional European context for food processing's association with cancer risk at multiple anatomical sites, aligning with the study's scope.
5. <https://www.theoncologypharmacist.com/articles/consumption-of-ultra-processed-foods-linked-to-higher-cancer-risk> - Validates the study's conclusions about cancer mortality risks and discusses industrial processing contaminants as potential carcinogens.
6. <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/news/242892/ultra-processed-foods-linked-increased-risk-cancer/> - Details the policy recommendations mentioned in the study, including front-of-pack labeling and taxation strategies for ultra-processed foods.
7. <https://www.getsurrey.co.uk/news/health/doctors-say-cutting-one-type-31506848> - Please view link - unable to able to access data