# Study links ultra-processed foods to up to 14% of premature deaths globally



A recent international study has raised alarms about the health risks associated with ultra-processed foods (UPFs), suggesting that these products and their artificial additives may significantly increase the likelihood of premature death. This research, published in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, is the work of a team from Latin America, which has revealed that between 4% and 14% of premature deaths in various countries can be linked to UPF consumption.

The lead investigator, Eduardo Augusto Fernandes Nilson from the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation in Brazil, highlighted that each 10% rise in UPF intake correlates with a 3% higher risk of dying before the age of 70. Nilson pointed out that the dangers posed by UPFs extend beyond their high levels of salt, sugar, and fat. The study underlines the concern surrounding emulsifiers, artificial flavourings, and other additives that result from industrial processing methods.

UPFs, classified as the least healthy category in the Nova food classification system, include items produced through industrial techniques such as extrusion and pre-frying. They often contain cosmetic additives like high-fructose corn syrup and hydrogenated oils, alongside products such as sugary cereals, fizzy drinks, and processed meats. The study involved a comprehensive analysis of dietary patterns and mortality data across eight nations: Australia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, the UK, and the US.

The findings indicate that countries with higher consumption of UPFs report greater mortality rates. For instance, in the United States, 60% of the average caloric intake comes from UPFs, which contributed to over 124,000 premature deaths—accounting for approximately 13.7% of all deaths in 2018. In the UK, UPFs made up 57% of caloric consumption, leading to an estimated 17,700 preventable deaths in 2019. Conversely, lower UPF consumption in countries like Colombia (4%), Brazil (5%), and Chile (6%) resulted in notably fewer premature deaths.

However, the study's findings have been met with some scepticism. Experts like Jenny Chapman, a Churchill Fellow, have pointed out potential flaws in the Nova classification, which may misrepresent certain foods that contain beneficial nutrients, such as fibre-rich breads and cereals, as UPFs. Nerys Astbury, a nutrition scientist at the University of Oxford, indicated that the study does not definitively establish a causative link between UPF consumption and premature death. Moreover, Nita Forouhi from the University of Cambridge acknowledged the limitations of the research while affirming that evidence regarding the health risks associated with UPFs is mounting.

In light of these findings, the authors advocate for the incorporation of strategies to reduce UPF intake into national dietary guidelines and public health policies. Nilson emphasised the necessity for global policies that discourage UPF consumption in favour of traditional diets centred around fresh, minimally processed foods.

The increasing scrutiny of UPFs has also impacted the plant-based food sector. As concerns about UPFs grow, there has been a notable decline in the sales of plant-based meats, which often contain similar additives and processing methods. In the US, sales of these products dropped by 5%, while interest in traditional plant proteins like tofu and tempeh rose by 7%. In the UK, new plant protein innovations are emerging, such as Veg’chop from Oh So Wholesome and the Super Superfood from THIS.

The nuanced debate around UPFs continues, with experts like Astbury cautioning against hastily adding new dietary recommendations, as existing guidelines already encourage the reduction of energy-dense, high-fat, and high-sugar foods, many of which fall under the UPF category. The conversation surrounding the classification and health impacts of ultra-processed foods remains ongoing, with researchers and health professionals navigating the complex landscape of dietary guidance and public health.

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

## Bibliography

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