# Study reveals even small amounts of ultra-processed foods significantly raise heart disease and cancer risk



# The Rising Risk of Ultra-Processed Foods: New Research Highlights Alarming Health Impacts

Just a handful of ultra-processed foods a day, such as crisps and sweets, may elevate the risk of serious health issues like heart disease and cancer, according to compelling research emerging from China. This study, which tracked the diets of over eight million adults, adds significant weight to a growing body of evidence condemning the consumption of additive-laden foods.

Experts have long warned about the dangers of ultra-processed foods (UPFs), which are defined as items that contain more artificial ingredients than natural ones. For decades, these products have been linked with various health risks, particularly type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease. Recent findings from a comprehensive review indicate that consuming an additional 100 grams of UPFs daily—approximately the equivalent of two packets of crisps—could increase the risk of digestive diseases by nearly 20%.

Dr. Xiao Liu, a cardiology expert at Sun Yat-sen University and co-author of the study, emphasised that these foods are typically high in added sugars, sodium, and unhealthy fats, while lacking essential nutrients like fibre and vitamins. This nutritional imbalance can lead to a myriad of adverse health outcomes. “Emerging evidence suggests a dose-response relationship between UPF consumption and negative health outcomes—meaning the more UPFs consumed, the greater the health risk,” he stated following the findings presented at the American College of Cardiology (ACC) Asia 2025 conference in Singapore.

In examining 41 studies from regions such as North and South America, Europe, Asia, and Oceania, researchers established that every additional 100 grams of UPFs correlates with a 5.9% increased risk of cardiovascular events and a 1.2% rise in cancer risk. Notably, the potential for developing high blood pressure was found to increase by 14.5%, while the likelihood of early death rose by 2.6%. These alarming statistics paint a sobering picture of the health implications of a diet high in UPFs.

The classification of foods established by the Nova system, developed in Brazil, distinguishes between unprocessed foods like fruits and vegetables, processed culinary ingredients such as sugar and salt, and ultra-processed foods laden with additives. The UK stands out as particularly prone to UPF consumption, with such foods constituting an estimated 57% of the national diet. This dependency on UPFs is believed to be a significant contributor to the obesity epidemic, costing the NHS approximately £6.5 billion annually in treating weight-related diseases.

Complementing this study, research published by the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) involving 266,666 adults across seven European countries corroborates the conclusion that diets rich in ultra-processed foods are linked to increased risks of cancer and cardiometabolic diseases. This broad analysis highlights the urgent need for public health interventions aimed at reducing UPF consumption.

The implications of these dietary habits are particularly concerning when examining the effects on children. Disturbing data suggests that young children who consume high amounts of UPFs exhibit early signs of poor heart health and diabetes risk factors, signalling a rising tide of health complications from an early age.

As these findings circulate, health professionals and researchers urge governments to enhance food labelling regulations to help consumers make more informed choices. There is a growing consensus that reducing UPF intake even modestly could result in significant health benefits. The landscape of our diets is shifting, and it is crucial that society responds with effective strategies to mitigate the looming health crisis associated with ultra-processed foods.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-14690703/handful-day-risk-cancer-heart-attack-study-ultra-processed-food.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[3]](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2666776223001904)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-14690703/handful-day-risk-cancer-heart-attack-study-ultra-processed-food.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[5]](https://www.theguardian.com/science/2023/aug/27/ultra-processed-food-raises-risk-of-heart-attack-and-stroke-two-studies-show)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-14690703/handful-day-risk-cancer-heart-attack-study-ultra-processed-food.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[6]](https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2023/01/230131183131.htm)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-14690703/handful-day-risk-cancer-heart-attack-study-ultra-processed-food.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[4]](https://www.wcrf.org/about-us/news-and-blogs/ultra-processed-foods-linked-to-increased-cancer-risk-diabetes-and-heart-disease/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[2]](https://www.iarc.who.int/news-events/ultra-processed-foods-are-associated-with-increased-risk-of-cancer-and-cardiometabolic-multimorbidity/), [[7]](https://www.washingtonpost.com/wellness/2024/02/29/ultraprocessed-foods-health-risk/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-14690703/handful-day-risk-cancer-heart-attack-study-ultra-processed-food.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.iarc.who.int/news-events/ultra-processed-foods-are-associated-with-increased-risk-of-cancer-and-cardiometabolic-multimorbidity/> - A multinational study involving 266,666 adults from seven European countries found that higher consumption of ultra-processed foods is linked to an increased risk of cancer and cardiometabolic diseases. The study, published by the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), highlights the association between diets rich in ultra-processed foods and the development of multiple chronic health conditions. The findings underscore the need for dietary interventions and public health strategies to reduce the intake of such foods to mitigate associated health risks.
3. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2666776223001904> - A comprehensive meta-analysis published in The Lancet Regional Health – Europe examined data from 266,666 adults across seven European countries. The study found that increased consumption of ultra-processed foods is associated with a higher risk of developing cancer and cardiometabolic diseases. The research emphasizes the importance of dietary patterns in the prevention of these health conditions and suggests that reducing the intake of ultra-processed foods could be beneficial for public health.
4. <https://www.wcrf.org/about-us/news-and-blogs/ultra-processed-foods-linked-to-increased-cancer-risk-diabetes-and-heart-disease/> - The World Cancer Research Fund (WCRF) reports on a study involving 266,666 adults from seven European countries, which found that higher consumption of ultra-processed foods is linked to an increased risk of cancer, diabetes, and heart disease. The study, conducted in collaboration with the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), highlights the health risks associated with diets high in ultra-processed foods and calls for public health interventions to address these concerns.
5. <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2023/aug/27/ultra-processed-food-raises-risk-of-heart-attack-and-stroke-two-studies-show> - An article in The Guardian discusses two large studies presented at the European Society of Cardiology conference, which found that diets high in ultra-processed foods are associated with an increased risk of heart attacks and strokes. The studies highlight the detrimental impact of ultra-processed foods on cardiovascular health and emphasize the need for dietary changes to reduce these risks.
6. <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2023/01/230131183131.htm> - A study published in ScienceDaily reports that higher consumption of ultra-processed foods is associated with an increased risk of developing cancer, particularly ovarian and brain cancers. The research, based on UK Biobank data, also found a higher risk of cancer-related mortality, especially for ovarian and breast cancers. The study underscores the health risks associated with diets high in ultra-processed foods and calls for public health interventions to address these concerns.
7. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wellness/2024/02/29/ultraprocessed-foods-health-risk/> - A comprehensive review published in The Washington Post examines research involving nearly 10 million people, finding a direct association between high consumption of ultra-processed foods and over 30 health conditions, including heart disease, anxiety, and early death. The review highlights the widespread health risks associated with diets rich in ultra-processed foods and emphasizes the need for public health strategies to mitigate these risks.