# New research challenges negative perceptions of plant-based meats as ultra-processed foods



The conversation surrounding ultra-processed foods (UPFs) has become increasingly polarised, with many consumers questioning the health implications of products like plant-based meat. Recent research indicates that consumers often perceive these alternatives as excessively processed, clouding their judgement and potentially leading to unfounded fears. In the UK, for instance, a staggering half of consumers express concern over the unnatural quality of plant-based meats, and 54% of Europeans actively avoid them due to their UPF classification. In America, a quarter of consumers report pausing their purchase of meat analogues, primarily due to concerns about their nutritional value.

In the context of these anxieties, a report by the Physicians Association for Nutrition (PAN) and the Good Food Institute (GFI) Europe underlines significant nuances that are often overlooked—even when discussions of UPFs dominate. The report emphasises that while many foods branded as ultra-processed have been linked to negative health outcomes, plant-based meats possess a distinctly different nutritional profile. This discrepancy suggests that blanket categorisation could mislead consumers.

A deeper analysis shows that plant-based meats, when evaluated against conventional processed meats, present a better option for health-conscious consumers. The report indicates that these plant-based alternatives can improve critical health indicators such as cholesterol levels and overall diet quality. Interestingly, macronutrient comparisons reveal that plant-based meats meet fewer criteria for classification as UPFs. They tend to offer higher levels of dietary fibre and lower saturated fat content compared to conventional alternatives, potentially making them a healthier choice.

Despite these distinctions, existing research on UPFs frequently fails to accurately capture the nutritional benefits of plant-based meats. Much of this literature relies on outdated food diaries, which inadequately reflect modern formulations and consumer trends. This has led to skewed perceptions where plant-based options are unduly blamed for health issues associated with more detrimental UPFs—like sugary drinks and heavily processed snacks.

Moreover, more recent studies hint at the nuanced relationship between food processing and health outcomes. For instance, research conducted by Imperial College London has illuminated that consuming plant-based UPFs could correlate with an increased risk of cardiovascular diseases compared to unprocessed plant foods. This adds another layer of complication to marketing and consumer perceptions, reinforcing the need for clarity in dietary guidance and public health messaging.

Roberta Alessandrini, director of PAN’s Dietary Guidelines Initiative, articulated the urgency of dispelling misconceptions surrounding plant-based meats. “The conversation around ultra-processed foods has become increasingly polarised,” she noted, emphasising the need for a scientific basis to understand where plant-based meats genuinely fit into nutrition. Thus, as the push for a plant-rich diet intensifies amid growing climate concerns, the marketing narrative must pivot to highlight how plant-based foods can play a vital role in healthier eating patterns.

Furthermore, the PAN and GFI report advocates for an expansion of research into the unique characteristics of plant-based meats and their long-term health impacts. The call for more interventional studies aims to discern specific UPF features that drive adverse health effects and to identify positive attributes inherent to vegan alternatives. Such efforts could inform dietary recommendations more effectively, aiding consumers in making informed decisions that align with their health goals.

The debate over plant-based meats and UPFs underscores a broader issue within nutritional science: the importance of context. While there is merit in scrutinising the degree of processing in foods, not all UPFs are detrimental to health, and some may actually contribute positively to dietary diversity and nutrition. Given the growing evidence base and consumer interest, a well-informed approach could help usher in a more sustainable and health-conscious food landscape. The key lies in understanding that healthier lifestyles can emerge from varied pathways, and that plant-based meats could—when properly fortified and formulated—be an important part of that journey.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraphs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6
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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.greenqueen.com.hk/plant-based-meat-ultra-processed-food-upf-health-vegan/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.greenqueen.com.hk/plant-based-meat-ultra-processed-food-upf-health-vegan/> - This article discusses how research on ultra-processed foods (UPFs) often overlooks nuances related to plant-based meats, potentially misleading consumers about their health impacts. It highlights that while UPFs are generally associated with negative health outcomes, plant-based meats have a different nutritional profile and may offer health benefits. The article emphasizes the need for more accurate communication and research to better understand the role of plant-based meats in a healthy diet.
3. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/british-journal-of-nutrition/article/nutritional-composition-of-ultraprocessed-plantbased-foods-in-the-outofhome-environment-a-multicountry-survey-with-plantbased-burgers/F8367FCF566A1D2D92A05BB91325FB4C> - This study analyzes the nutritional composition of ultra-processed plant-based burgers available in out-of-home environments across multiple countries. The findings indicate that these burgers provide protein, dietary fiber, and essential minerals but are also relatively high in energy, sodium, and total fats. The amino acid composition suggests low protein quality. The study calls for manufacturers to improve these products to better support healthy dietary habits.
4. <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/news/254034/plant-based-upfs-linked-with-higher-risk/> - Research from Imperial College London and the University of São Paulo found that consuming plant-based ultra-processed foods (UPFs) is linked to a 7% increase in the risk of cardiovascular diseases compared to unprocessed plant-based foods. The study suggests that while plant-based diets are generally beneficial, the degree of food processing plays a significant role in health outcomes, advocating for reduced consumption of UPFs.
5. <https://www.pan-foundation.org/nutrition-insights/position-paper-on-plant-based-meat-products> - The Physicians Association for Nutrition (PAN) International Foundation's position paper examines plant-based meat products, noting that while many are classified as ultra-processed foods, specific evidence on their long-term health impacts is lacking. The paper emphasizes the need for high-quality scientific research to understand the health implications of these products and supports their role in promoting plant-based diets.
6. <https://www.reuters.com/business/retail-consumer/unilever-faces-battle-reduce-plant-based-meat-exposure-2025-02-25/> - Unilever is facing challenges in selling its plant-based meat business, the Vegetarian Butcher, due to declining consumer interest in processed vegetarian products. The shift towards fresh produce and criticism of plant-based meats as 'ultra-processed' have impacted the brand's performance, leading Unilever to consider selling the loss-making business.
7. <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2024/12/241217131336.htm> - A study from the University of Surrey found that vegetarians who consumed processed plant-based meat alternatives had a 42% increased risk of depression compared to those who refrained from such products. The research highlights potential health risks associated with ultra-processed foods, even within vegetarian diets, and calls for further investigation into their long-term effects.