# Ultra-processed foods debate complicates climate change and health progress



The rising discourse around ultra-processed foods (UPFs) is increasingly intertwined with climate change discussions, revealing a complex narrative that goes beyond mere dietary preferences. Dr Sarah Ison, global director of research at Madre Brava, asserts that the polarising debate on UPFs can hinder crucial progress in the fight against climate change. While many are drawn to the sensational aspects of the UPF conversation, it is vital to understand that these foods directly link to larger issues, including environmental degradation and sustainability in our diets.

UPFs, which comprise roughly 60% of the average diet in high-income countries, contribute significantly to greenhouse gas emissions—estimated to be about one-third of total emissions globally. Animal-based foods are responsible for roughly double the emissions compared to plant-based options. In this context, dietary shifts towards plant proteins are not just beneficial for health; they could also aid in mitigating climate change effects. The current consumption patterns show that high-income nations derive about 65% of their protein from animal sources, raising concerns about substantial overconsumption relative to recommended levels. This dietary imbalance not only correlates with health problems such as obesity, diabetes, and heart disease but also exacerbates environmental woes linked to animal agriculture, including deforestation and water depletion.

The narrative surrounding plant-based meats, often labelled as UPFs, requires a nuanced perspective. It is crucial to distinguish between different types of UPFs; while some, like sugary snacks, undoubtedly raise health concerns, others can play a role in a sustainable diet. Comparatively, plant-based alternatives often have superior nutritional profiles—typically higher in fibre and lower in unhealthy fats—when juxtaposed against their meat counterparts. Recent systematic reviews indicate health benefits linked to these alternatives, such as cholesterol reduction and weight management, suggesting that when consumed as part of a balanced diet, they do not carry the negative health implications often associated with ultra-processed foods.

Despite these benefits, the growing misconception about plant-based alternatives diminishes consumer confidence. The public often views all UPFs uniformly, failing to recognise that not all ultra-processed items are detrimental to health or the environment. The criticism of plant-based meats usually focuses on their processing level while ignoring the substantial health risks linked to traditional meat consumption. This disparity in evaluation points to a growing misinformation cycle that complicates informed dietary choices.

In light of these findings, it becomes clear that the conversation surrounding UPFs and plant-based diets must evolve. Consumers should not feel overwhelmed by the conflicting messages about UPFs; rather, they should focus on incorporating whole, minimally processed foods into their diets. The discussions must shift towards promoting high-quality information that highlights the importance of dietary diversity, as well as the benefits of reduced meat consumption for both human health and environmental sustainability.

As the demand for plant-based foods grows, manufacturers increasingly shoulder the responsibility to maintain transparency regarding ingredient quality. Monitoring added salt and sugar levels and adhering to scientific evidence can assure consumers of the health benefits linked to these products. In the bigger picture, the query remains: how can we reformulate our diets to better serve the planet while also nurturing our health? The answer lies in embracing a balanced approach that champions minimally processed options and promotes plant-based foods as vital components of a sustainable future.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.greenqueen.com.hk/ultra-processed-foods-plant-based-meat-climate-change-upf/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.greenqueen.com.hk/ultra-processed-foods-plant-based-meat-climate-change-upf/), [[2]](https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/proceedings-of-the-nutrition-society/article/food-system-and-climate-change-are-plantbased-diets-becoming-unhealthy-and-less-environmentally-sustainable/525CDD9FC618E5488A5B931669FA7493), [[4]](https://www.foodnavigator.com/Article/2021/11/11/Study-charts-impact-of-ultra-processed-foods-Diet-related-disease-and-climate-change-share-an-underlying-driver/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[5]](https://www.greenqueen.com.hk/ultra-processed-foods-list-plant-based-meat-guide/), [[6]](https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/proceedings-of-the-nutrition-society/article/food-system-and-climate-change-are-plantbased-diets-becoming-unhealthy-and-less-environmentally-sustainable/525CDD9FC618E5488A5B931669FA7493)
* Paragraph 4 – [[3]](https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2021/11/211111080345.htm), [[7]](https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2021/11/211111080345.htm)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.greenqueen.com.hk/ultra-processed-foods-plant-based-meat-climate-change-upf/), [[2]](https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/proceedings-of-the-nutrition-society/article/food-system-and-climate-change-are-plantbased-diets-becoming-unhealthy-and-less-environmentally-sustainable/525CDD9FC618E5488A5B931669FA7493)

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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://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/proceedings-of-the-nutrition-society/article/food-system-and-climate-change-are-plantbased-diets-becoming-unhealthy-and-less-environmentally-sustainable/525CDD9FC618E5488A5B931669FA7493> - This article examines the environmental and health implications of ultra-processed plant-based foods. It highlights that while plant-based diets are generally considered healthier and more sustainable, the rise of highly processed plant-based products may pose health risks and have a higher environmental impact compared to minimally processed options. The study emphasizes the need for a balanced approach to plant-based diets, advocating for the consumption of whole, minimally processed foods to maximize health and environmental benefits.
3. <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2021/11/211111080345.htm> - A study from City University London reveals that over the past 30 years, Brazil's diet has shifted towards higher consumption of ultra-processed foods, significantly contributing to increased greenhouse gas emissions, water usage, and ecological footprints, including deforestation. The research underscores the environmental impact of dietary choices and calls for a reevaluation of food processing practices to mitigate climate change effects.
4. <https://www.foodnavigator.com/Article/2021/11/11/Study-charts-impact-of-ultra-processed-foods-Diet-related-disease-and-climate-change-share-an-underlying-driver/> - This article discusses a study linking increased consumption of ultra-processed foods to higher greenhouse gas emissions. The research indicates that diets rich in ultra-processed foods, such as reconstituted meat products and ready meals, have a more significant environmental impact, contributing to climate change. The study highlights the need for dietary changes to address both health and environmental concerns.
5. <https://www.greenqueen.com.hk/ultra-processed-foods-list-plant-based-meat-guide/> - Green Queen's comprehensive FAQ guide addresses common questions about ultra-processed foods (UPFs) and plant-based meats. It clarifies that not all UPFs are equal, emphasizing that plant-based meat alternatives often have better nutritional profiles compared to their animal-based counterparts. The guide also discusses the environmental benefits of plant-based diets and the importance of understanding food processing levels to make informed dietary choices.
6. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/proceedings-of-the-nutrition-society/article/food-system-and-climate-change-are-plantbased-diets-becoming-unhealthy-and-less-environmentally-sustainable/525CDD9FC618E5488A5B931669FA7493> - This article examines the environmental and health implications of ultra-processed plant-based foods. It highlights that while plant-based diets are generally considered healthier and more sustainable, the rise of highly processed plant-based products may pose health risks and have a higher environmental impact compared to minimally processed options. The study emphasizes the need for a balanced approach to plant-based diets, advocating for the consumption of whole, minimally processed foods to maximize health and environmental benefits.
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