# Rising colon cancer among the young linked to ultra-processed foods and improved treatments



Colon cancer rates have been rising alarmingly among younger populations, a trend that experts increasingly link to dietary factors, particularly the consumption of ultra-processed foods. Recent research, including a large-scale study analysed by the Colon Cancer Foundation, points to diets high in ultra-processed foods — such as red and processed meats — as significantly elevating the risk of colorectal cancer (CRC). This study, which surveyed over 200,000 participants across three prospective cohorts in the United States, found a 29% greater risk of CRC among those with the highest intake of these foods compared to those with the lowest consumption. The mechanisms behind this association appear to involve harmful alterations in the gut microbiota and increased obesity risk, both factors known to contribute to CRC development.

Further research from the University of South Florida and Tampa General Hospital Cancer Institute adds biological plausibility by demonstrating how ultra-processed food consumption sparks chronic inflammation. This persistent inflammatory state debilitates the body's natural healing processes and creates an environment conducive to tumour growth in the colon. The inflammation observed in patients with unhealthy diets was also detected in their colon tumours, underlining the role of diet-induced inflammation in cancer progression.

Ultra-processed foods, often loaded with artificial additives, preservatives, sugars, and unhealthy fats, disrupt healthy gut bacteria, exacerbating inflammation and potentially driving carcinogenic processes according to health experts. Guidelines increasingly recommend limiting these foods to reduce the risk of CRC and other related diseases.

However, while dietary factors are paramount, other causes of colon cancer should not be overlooked. Personal accounts, such as that shared by Sian Phillips from London, highlight the crucial role of genetics and early detection. Diagnosed with colon cancer at 43 due to a genetic deficiency, Phillips underscores that her cancer was not caused by diet but a hereditary condition that made her eligible for cutting-edge immunotherapy. Her experience poignantly reveals how important vigilance and persistence are in early diagnosis, especially since her only symptom was iron deficiency — a sign often dismissed or overlooked, particularly in younger people and women. Phillips calls for greater awareness among both patients and healthcare providers about the symptoms and the imperative for timely testing, including iron and stool tests, to facilitate early intervention and improve prognoses.

The promise of immunotherapy in treating certain types of colon cancer is a significant development in oncology. A recent clinical trial presented at the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) meeting illustrated that combining Roche’s immunotherapy drug Tecentriq with chemotherapy after surgery could reduce cancer recurrence and mortality by 50% in patients with stage 3 colon cancer characterised by deficient DNA mismatch repair (dMMR)—a genetic defect affecting approximately 15% of colon cancer cases. This breakthrough offers hope for improved survival rates and personalised treatment strategies.

Despite the strong scientific consensus on the risks posed by ultra-processed foods, the context of food insecurity complicates public health messaging. The Guardian letter from Aisling Spain in Belfast raises a critical point about affordability and accessibility. With UK food prices having surged by 37% between January 2020 and July 2025, many people face harsh economic realities that make ultra-processed foods the only viable option. Indeed, government-reported data from the Trussell Trust indicates that over 14 million individuals experienced food insecurity in 2024 alone. Spain argues that simply urging healthier eating while costs rise amounts to a "patronising tax" on the most vulnerable populations. Instead, she advocates for policies aimed at reducing the cost of healthy food to genuinely empower responsible dietary choices.

In summary, the complex challenge of combating the rise in colon cancer involves addressing the dietary risks associated with ultra-processed foods alongside recognising genetic factors and expanding access to advanced treatments like immunotherapy. Equally crucial is ensuring early detection and supporting equitable access to affordable, nutritious food, thus creating a holistic approach to tackling this public health threat.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[2]](https://coloncancerfoundation.org/ultra-processed-foods-a-risk-factor-for-colorectal-cancer/), [[3]](https://www.geisinger.org/health-and-wellness/wellness-articles/2022/09/20/18/43/ultra-processed-foods-and-colon-cancer), [[6]](https://www.axios.com/2022/09/01/ultra-processed-foods-risk-cancer-death), [[7]](https://www.healio.com/news/hematology-oncology/20220901/ultraprocessed-food-consumption-linked-to-risk-for-colorectal-cancer-among-men)
* Paragraph 2 – [[4]](https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2024/12/241210115102.htm), [[3]](https://www.geisinger.org/health-and-wellness/wellness-articles/2022/09/20/18/43/ultra-processed-foods-and-colon-cancer)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/oct/07/colon-cancer-the-risks-of-ultra-processed-foods-and-the-need-for-early-detection)
* Paragraph 4 – [[5]](https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/health-rounds-roches-tecentriq-reduces-recurrence-deaths-certain-colon-cancer-2025-06-06/), [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/oct/07/colon-cancer-the-risks-of-ultra-processed-foods-and-the-need-for-early-detection)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/oct/07/colon-cancer-the-risks-of-ultra-processed-foods-and-the-need-for-early-detection)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/oct/07/colon-cancer-the-risks-of-ultra-processed-foods-and-the-need-for-early-detection), [[2]](https://coloncancerfoundation.org/ultra-processed-foods-a-risk-factor-for-colorectal-cancer/), [[6]](https://www.axios.com/2022/09/01/ultra-processed-foods-risk-cancer-death)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/oct/07/colon-cancer-the-risks-of-ultra-processed-foods-and-the-need-for-early-detection> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://coloncancerfoundation.org/ultra-processed-foods-a-risk-factor-for-colorectal-cancer/> - A study published by the Colon Cancer Foundation highlights that diets high in ultra-processed foods, such as red and processed meats, are considered high-risk for colorectal cancer (CRC). The study analysed responses from over 200,000 participants across three large prospective studies in the U.S. and found that those who consumed the highest amount of ultra-processed foods had a 29% higher risk of CRC compared to those with the lowest consumption. The study suggests that ultra-processed foods may increase CRC risk by altering the composition and diversity of gut microbiota and increasing the risk of obesity.
3. <https://www.geisinger.org/health-and-wellness/wellness-articles/2022/09/20/18/43/ultra-processed-foods-and-colon-cancer> - An article from Geisinger discusses the link between ultra-processed foods and colon cancer risk. It explains that ultra-processed foods, which are prepackaged and ready to eat, contain artificial colours, flavours, sweeteners, and preservatives along with fats, starches, sugars, and hydrogenated fats. These foods may alter the healthy bacteria in the gut, worsening inflammation and leading to an increased risk of colorectal cancer. The article advises limiting the intake of ultra-processed foods to reduce this risk.
4. <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2024/12/241210115102.htm> - A study from the University of South Florida and Tampa General Hospital Cancer Institute found that ultra-processed foods might be fueling colon cancer by sparking chronic inflammation that disables the body’s healing power and fuels tumor growth. The researchers observed that patients with unhealthy diets had increased inflammation in their bodies, which was also present in the colon tumors themselves. This chronic inflammation hampers the body's ability to heal, allowing cancer to grow.
5. <https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/health-rounds-roches-tecentriq-reduces-recurrence-deaths-certain-colon-cancer-2025-06-06/> - A clinical trial presented at the ASCO meeting showed that adding Roche’s immunotherapy drug Tecentriq to chemotherapy after surgery in certain patients with stage 3 colon cancer led to a 50% reduction in cancer recurrence and death compared to chemotherapy alone. The study involved 712 patients with tumors having a genetic defect known as deficient DNA mismatch repair (dMMR), affecting about 15% of such patients. This finding represents a major advance in the adjuvant treatment of dMMR stage 3 colon cancer.
6. <https://www.axios.com/2022/09/01/ultra-processed-foods-risk-cancer-death> - Two large-scale studies published in the BMJ medical journal found that consuming ultra-processed foods significantly increases the risk of developing cancer and experiencing early death. The research, conducted in the U.S. and Italy, links high intake of ultra-processed foods to elevated risks of cardiovascular diseases, overall mortality, and particularly an increased rate of colorectal cancer deaths in men. The studies suggest that additives in these foods may increase gut inflammation and promote colon cancer.
7. <https://www.healio.com/news/hematology-oncology/20220901/ultraprocessed-food-consumption-linked-to-risk-for-colorectal-cancer-among-men> - A study published in Healio found that men in the highest fifth of ultra-processed food consumption had a 29% higher colorectal cancer risk compared with those in the lowest fifth of consumption. The study identified 3,216 colorectal cancer cases during the study period and found the positive association to be limited to distal colon cancer, with a 72% increased risk. The researchers adjusted for BMI and indicators of nutritional quality of the diet, and the associations remained significant.