# Risks of Ultra-Processed Foods: Impacts on Health and Recommendations for Dietary Changes



In the United States, a significant portion of the food supply, about 73%, is classified as "ultra-processed foods" (UPFs). These foods include items such as chips, sodas, microwave dinners, and packaged bread. UPFs are composed of industrial food substances and cosmetic additives, which are used to enhance the taste and appearance of the products. Ingredients commonly found in UPFs include sugars like corn syrup, maltodextrin, hydrogenated oils, emulsifiers such as soy lecithin, and thickeners like guar gum and xanthan gum.

Recent studies have highlighted the potential health risks associated with consuming UPFs. These studies indicate a connection between UPFs and several health issues, including obesity, type 2 diabetes, colorectal cancer, heart disease, depression, and other chronic conditions. Despite these risks, the average American diet consists of more than 60% ultra-processed foods, a higher percentage than any other country.

One notable study conducted in 2019 provided compelling evidence of the negative impacts of UPFs. The study involved 20 healthy adults who alternated between an ultra-processed diet and a minimally processed diet, each for two weeks. Despite both diets being nutritionally matched, participants consumed 500 more calories per day and gained more weight on the ultra-processed diet.

Further studies have reinforced these findings. For instance, a 2022 study published in the British Medical Journal linked a high intake of UPFs to a 29% increase in colorectal cancer risk among men. Another 2023 study presented at the European Society of Cardiology Congress found a 10% increase in daily UPF intake was associated with a 6% rise in heart disease risk. Additionally, a Harvard study found that women consuming the highest amounts of UPFs were 50% more likely to develop depression.

Given these concerns, researchers advocate for increased consumption of whole, minimally processed foods and more rigorous studies to further understand UPFs' health impacts. This growing body of evidence may eventually influence nutrition policies in the United States.