



Food, Farming
& Countryside
Commission

UPF and Health

Food Farming & Countryside Commission

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Rapidly expanding area

- Obesity and weight gain
- Type 2 Diabetes
- Heart disease and stroke
- Various cancers
- Mental health issues
- All cause mortality (death from any cause)
- Cognitive decline, dementia



Digging deeper...

Obesity and weight gain

General findings: eating more UPF, more likely to gain weight, develop obesity, struggle to lose weight

- Example research:
 - Experiment in USA had people live in a facility, controlled what they ate – UPF or minimally processed
 - UPF group = 500 calories more per day, weight gain

Digging deeper...

Heart disease

Example research finding: Each 10% increase in UPF eaten = 12% higher risk of heart disease, 13% higher risk of high blood pressure

Cancer

Example research finding: Each 10% increase in UPF eaten = 12% higher risk of cancer overall and 11% higher risk of breast cancer

Digging deeper

Mental health

Example research finding: High UPF consumption associated with a 44% higher change of having symptoms of depression

In general, there is an association between UPF and many health conditions. As UPF consumption increases, risk of developing health conditions increase



How does UPF impact health?

- Unclear...
 - Tend to be lower in fibre, higher in salt, added sugar, saturated fat
 - Contain additives (emulsifiers, sweeteners, preservatives) that impact health
 - Very tasty and easy to eat – eating more than intended

Limitations in the evidence

- **Few randomised controlled trials**
 - Gold standard, most reliable
 - BUT ethical considerations, expensive, participant burden, real world relevance
- **Observational studies**
 - Snapshots, surveillance
 - Cross-sectional, cohorts, ecological studies
 - Is what we're seeing actually down to UPF?

Limitations in the evidence

- Correlation / causation
 - Does eating more ice cream = more drowning deaths?
 - Hot weather! Correlation, not causation
 - So what is happening with UPF and health?
- Other factors involved? For example, lifestyle, overall diet quality

Strengths in the evidence

- Consistency
 - Across populations, study types, health conditions
- Dose-response
 - As UPF intake goes up, ill health goes up
- Following people over time
- Biological plausibility
 - All of the potential ways UPF could harm health actually make sense
- Adjustment for potential confounders
 - Researchers are aware and do what they can to strengthen research

What expert organisations say about UPF?

Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition

- **July 2023:** ‘concerning’ evidence, but findings should be treated with caution
- **April 2025:**
 - Consistent associations between UPF and ill health
 - Concerning
 - Encourage more research and industry transparency



What expert organisations say about UPF?

World Health Organization

- Include UPF in their assessments of impacts on health (alongside tobacco, alcohol, air quality)
- No specific guidance on UPF yet



Overall:

- Most of the studies are observational, but many studies consistently link UPF to ill health
- We still don't know if its processing itself, nutritional content of products, or other potential mechanisms causing ill health
- SACN did not recommend changes to current UK dietary guidelines but have committed to keeping the issue under annual review, call for more transparency and more research