



New Studies: Highly Processed Foods Linked to Increased Disease and Mortality Risks

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Ultra-processed foods aren't just [bad for your waistline](#); they may contribute to an increased risk of disease and mortality, according to two recent studies [published in BMJ](#) in May 2019.

The reports surface at a time when Americans are getting [more than half their calories](#) from ultra-processed foods, such as packaged snacks, soft drinks, ready-made meals, and sugary cereals, which contain added flavors, colors, sweeteners, emulsifiers, and other non-food ingredients.

The [first study](#), from the University of Paris, relied on questionnaires completed by more than 105,000 French adults over a median 5.2-year period. The researchers found that for every 10 percent of a respondent's diet that consisted of highly processed foods, there was a 12 percent increase in the rate of cardiovascular disease, a 13 percent increase in the rate of coronary heart disease, and an 11 percent increase in the rate of cerebrovascular disease (such as stroke). Researchers recorded 1,409 first-time cardiovascular disease events while following subjects over the course of five years. On the flip side, higher consumption of unprocessed or minimally processed foods was associated with lower risks of all reported disease.

The [second study](#), from the University of Navarra in Spain, polled nearly 20,000 people for up to 10 years. The researchers found that consumption of ultra-processed foods (more than four servings daily) was associated with a 62-percent increase in mortality. For each additional serving of ultra-processed food, mortality rates increased by 18 percent.

In both studies, researchers noted that people who consumed the most ultra-processed foods ate fewer fruits and vegetables and more fast food, fried foods, processed meats, and sugary beverages than other participants. The Spanish study also found that people who ate more ultra-processed foods were prone to have a higher average BMI, be sedentary, smoke, and binge-watch TV.

Both studies relied on personal recollections of meals, which can be unreliable, and did not account for socioeconomic factors. Still, the results serve as a wake-up call, says Ron Blankstein, MD, a preventive cardiologist at Brigham and Women's Hospital and associate professor at Harvard Medical School.

"Despite the fact [that] these are imperfect studies, they further highlight the harmful effects of consuming processed foods as well as the nutrition benefits of minimally processed and whole foods, such as those eaten on a [healthy whole-food, plant-based diet](#)," says Blankstein.

The "whole-food" part of "whole-food, plant-based" is becoming increasingly critical, says nutrition consultant Kelly Plowe, MS, RD, as [meat substitute sales are up](#) by more than 20 percent.

"This is something we need to keep in the back of our minds when we're shopping for vegan products," says Plowe. "When it comes to the meat-replacement category, the majority of the options on the market are ultra-processed."

The takeaway? Steer your grocery cart away from packaged goods such as TV dinners and packaged and flavored proteins, and load up on real foods such as fruits, veggies, and whole grains instead.

Ready to get started? Check out [Forks Meal Planner](#), FOK's easy weekly meal-planning tool to keep you on a healthy plant-based path.