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# Ultra-Processed Foods Should Be Illegal: An Empirical Argument for Government Prohibition

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**Abstract**
Ultra-processed foods (UPFs) have become a dominant feature of modern diets and are increasingly associated with severe public health harms. Research shows, for example, that about 55% of calories consumed in the United States are from UPFs (Williams, Couch, Emmerich, & Ogburn, 2025) [19], and these foods are associated with a significant portion of the roughly one million people who die from food-related conditions in the United States each year (Robinson, 2025) [13]. These foods, which are industrial formulations composed largely of refined substances, additives, preservatives, and synthetic ingredients, have been linked to obesity, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer, depression, and premature mortality (Lane, Gamage, Du, Ashtree, McGuinness, Gauci, *et al*., 2024) [7]. This paper argues that ultra-processed foods should be made illegal because the harms they impose on society are substantial, measurable, and preventable. Drawing on empirical evidence from large cohort studies, randomized controlled trials, and umbrella reviews, this paper demonstrates that UPFs contribute directly to chronic disease and excessive caloric intake. The paper further argues that the social costs of UPF consumption, which includes increased healthcare spending, reduced productivity, and preventable deaths, justify strong government intervention. Although critics might argue that prohibition would infringe on consumer freedom and create economic disruption, governments have historically prohibited harmful substances when evidence demonstrated overwhelming public danger. By comparing ultra-processed foods to products such as tobacco, lead paint, and trans fats, this paper concludes that banning ultra-processed foods is ethically justified and necessary for protecting public health.

**Keywords:** Ultra-processed foods (UPFs), Cardiovascular Disease (CVD), United States

## Introduction

Ultra-processed foods (UPFs) are among the most significant contributors to modern chronic disease. Defined under the NOVA food classification system as industrial formulations made primarily from substances extracted from foods or synthesized in laboratories, UPFs include products such as sugary cereals, packaged snacks, soft drinks, frozen meals, processed meats, candy, and fast food. Unlike minimally processed foods, UPFs are engineered for hyper-palatability, convenience, and long shelf life rather than nutritional value.

The rise of ultra-processed foods parallels rising rates of obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and other chronic illnesses across the globe. In many industrialized countries, UPFs account for over half of total caloric intake. The widespread availability and aggressive marketing of these products have transformed dietary habits and normalized consumption patterns that are biologically harmful. Although governments regulate many harmful substances, ultra-processed foods remain widely accessible despite mounting evidence that they damage human health.

This paper argues that ultra-processed foods should be illegal because empirical evidence demonstrates that they cause significant physical and psychological harm, create substantial societal costs, and undermine public health on a massive scale. The argument proceeds by examining scientific evidence regarding UPFs and disease, discussing their addictive and manipulative design, evaluating the economic and ethical implications of their consumption, and addressing common counterarguments against prohibition.

**Defining Ultra-Processed Foods**

The NOVA classification system divides foods into four categories based on processing level (Monteiro, 2009) [9]. Ultra-processed foods represent the most heavily altered category and are typically composed of refined sugars, industrial oils, flavor enhancers, emulsifiers, artificial colors, preservatives, and other additives rarely used in home cooking (Robinson, 2024) [14]. These foods differ fundamentally from minimally processed foods because their structure and composition are engineered for commercial profitability rather than nutritional integrity.

Examples of UPFs include soft drinks, packaged desserts, chips, instant noodles, processed meats, frozen pizzas, sweetened breakfast cereals, energy drinks, and many fast-food products. These foods are generally high in sodium, sugar, unhealthy fats, and calories while being low in fiber, vitamins, and essential nutrients.

Researchers increasingly argue that the problem with UPFs extends beyond their nutrient content alone. The industrial processing itself may alter digestion, satiety, metabolic responses, and eating behavior. Additives, altered food matrices, and engineered flavor combinations can encourage overconsumption and interfere with normal biological signaling mechanisms that typically tell people to stop eating when they are full (Godsey, Eden, & Emerson, 2025) [3].

**Empirical Evidence Linking UPFs to Disease**

One of the strongest arguments for banning ultra-processed foods is the extensive body of empirical evidence linking them to severe health outcomes. In recent years, researchers have conducted numerous cohort studies, meta-analyses, and randomized trials demonstrating that high UPF consumption is associated with increased risk of chronic disease and premature death. For example, a recent analysis claimed that a dietary pattern based on ultra-processed foods "increases the risk of multiple diet-related chronic diseases through various mechanisms," and the authors claim that this "is substantiated by more than 100 prospective studies, meta-analyses, randomised controlled trials, and mechanistic studies, covering adverse outcomes across nearly all organ systems" (Monteiro, Louzada, Steele-Martinez, Cannon, Andrade, Baker, Bes-Rastrollo, Bonaccio, Gearhardt, Khandpur, Kolby, Levy, Machado, Moubarac, Rezende, Rivera, Scrinis, Srour, Swinburn, & Touvier, 2025: 2667) [10].

A landmark umbrella review examined 45 meta-analyses involving nearly 10 million participants. The review found direct associations between UPF consumption and 32 adverse health outcomes, including cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, obesity, depression, anxiety, sleep disorders, and all-cause mortality (Lane *et al*., 2024) [7]. The authors concluded that higher exposure to ultra-processed foods consistently increased the risk of adverse health conditions across multiple bodily systems.

Among the most alarming findings was the association between UPF consumption and cardiovascular disease mortality. Individuals with higher UPF intake experienced significantly elevated risks of heart disease-related death. The umbrella review also found convincing evidence linking UPFs to type 2 diabetes. Specifically, every 10% increase in ultra-processed food intake was associated with a measurable increase in diabetes risk. Robinson and Turner (2019) [16] show significant evidence of culpability of corporations for the rise of and suffering associated with diabetes.

Additional cohort studies reinforce these findings. Srour *et al*. (2019), using data from the French NutriNet-Santé cohort, found that increased UPF consumption was associated with heightened risk of cardiovascular disease (CVD). Participants consuming higher percentages of calories from UPFs experienced significantly greater rates of heart disease and stroke over time.

Similarly, observational studies conducted in the United States and Europe consistently demonstrate associations between UPF intake and obesity (Dicken, & Batterham, 2024) [2]. Obesity itself increases risk for hypertension, diabetes, arthritis, sleep apnea, and several forms of cancer. Because obesity is one of the leading causes of preventable death worldwide, foods that systematically contribute to obesity represent a major public health threat.

Mental health outcomes are also increasingly linked to ultra-processed food consumption. The umbrella review noted above found strong associations between UPFs and anxiety, depression, and common mental disorders. Researchers hypothesize that inflammatory responses, disrupted gut microbiota, and unstable blood glucose levels may contribute to these psychological effects (Robinson, 2025) [13].

The breadth and consistency of these findings are particularly important. The evidence does not point to one isolated health problem but rather demonstrates that ultra-processed foods affect multiple systems throughout the body. Such widespread harm strengthens the argument for aggressive government intervention.

**Randomized Controlled Trials and Causal Evidence**

Critics of nutritional epidemiology often argue that observational studies cannot establish causation. However, evidence against ultra-processed foods is strengthened by randomized controlled trials demonstrating direct causal effects.

One of the most influential studies was conducted by researchers at the National Institutes of Health (NIH). In this randomized inpatient trial, participants consumed either ultra-processed diets or minimally processed diets for two weeks each. Importantly, the diets were matched for calories, sugar, fat, sodium, and fiber. Despite this matching, participants eating the ultra-processed diet consumed approximately 500 more calories per day and gained weight, while participants consuming minimally processed diets lost weight (Hall *et al*., 2019) [5].

The significance of this study cannot be overstated. It demonstrated experimentally that ultra-processed foods themselves promote overeating independent of calorie content and macronutrient composition. In other words, the industrial processing and formulation of the foods altered human eating behavior.

This finding supports the argument that UPFs are not merely unhealthy choices but engineered products designed in ways that override normal satiety mechanisms. Food companies employ teams of scientists to maximize palatability, texture, mouthfeel, and reward responses in consumers (Nestle, 2018) [11]. These products are intentionally optimized to increase consumption and repeat purchasing.

The addictive characteristics of UPFs further strengthen the case for prohibition. Emerging evidence suggests that highly processed foods activate reward pathways in the brain

similarly to addictive substances (Robinson, 2022) [15]. Frequent exposure can condition cravings and compulsive eating behaviors, particularly in children and adolescents whose brains are still developing.

Governments already regulate or prohibit addictive products that create widespread harm. Tobacco restrictions, alcohol regulations, and narcotics laws all reflect recognition that certain products are too dangerous to leave entirely to market forces. If ultra-processed foods produce addiction-like behaviors while contributing to millions of preventable illnesses, similar restrictions become ethically defensible.

**Economic and Social Costs of Ultra-Processed Foods**

Beyond individual health harms, ultra-processed foods impose enormous costs on society. Chronic diseases associated with poor diet account for substantial healthcare expenditures, lost productivity, disability, and premature mortality. Robinson (2024) [14] estimates these numbers to be in the hundreds of billions of dollars, and likely much more. For example, obesity-related healthcare costs alone total hundreds of billions of dollars annually worldwide. Diabetes treatment requires expensive medications, hospital care, and long-term monitoring. Cardiovascular disease remains one of the leading causes of death and medical spending globally. Much of this burden is linked directly to dietary patterns dominated by ultra-processed foods.

The social costs extend beyond healthcare systems. Individuals suffering from chronic disease often experience reduced quality of life, lower workplace productivity, and shortened life expectancy. Table 1 shows data from the Center for Science in the Public Interest (2025) [1] related to diseases associated with poor diet.

**Table 1:** Americans Living with Diseases Related to Diet

| | |
|---|---|
| Obesity | 78,100,000 |
| High Blood Pressure | 66,900,000 |
| Diabetes | 29,100,000 |
| Heart disease | 26,600,000 |
| Cancer | 20,073,000 |
| Osteoporosis | 9,900,000 |
| Stroke | 6,400,000 |

**Source of data:** Center for Science in the Public Interest (2025) [1]. Why good nutrition is important. Downloaded from: https://www.cspinet.org/eating-healthy/why-good-nutrition-important

Families bear emotional and financial burdens associated with long-term illness. Public healthcare systems must divert resources toward preventable conditions caused in part by harmful food environments.

These costs create a strong justification for government action. Governments routinely regulate products that impose negative externalities on society. For example, environmental regulations restrict pollution because the harms affect the broader public. Similarly, ultra-processed foods generate societal harms that extend far beyond individual consumers.

Children are particularly vulnerable to these harms. Aggressive advertising campaigns target children through television, social media, cartoons, and school partnerships (Robinson, 2024) [14]. Because children lack fully developed decision-making capacities, corporations can manipulate their preferences and establish lifelong unhealthy eating patterns.

The ethical implications are significant. A society that permits corporations to market addictive, disease-promoting products to children prioritizes corporate profit over public welfare. Governments have a moral obligation to protect vulnerable populations from preventable harm.

**Historical Precedents for Prohibition**

Opponents of banning ultra-processed foods often argue that prohibition would be unprecedented or overly authoritarian. However, governments have repeatedly prohibited or restricted products once evidence demonstrated substantial public harm. For example, lead paint was widely used before researchers discovered its devastating neurological effects, especially in children. Once the evidence became undeniable, governments banned lead in paint and gasoline. Similarly, asbestos was heavily restricted after links to cancer became clear.

Trans fats provide another relevant example. Scientific evidence demonstrated that artificial trans fats significantly increased risk of cardiovascular disease (Iqbal, 2014) [6]. In response, several governments prohibited or heavily restricted their use in foods. These policies resulted in measurable public health benefits.

Tobacco regulation also illustrates how governments intervene when products create widespread health harms. Cigarette advertising restrictions, warning labels, taxation, age limits, and smoking bans all emerged because unrestricted tobacco sales caused millions of preventable deaths.

Ultra-processed foods arguably present a comparable threat. They contribute to chronic diseases that collectively kill millions of people each year worldwide. Unlike naturally occurring foods, UPFs are industrially engineered products designed for mass consumption despite known health consequences.

Governments already prohibit certain substances in food production when evidence demonstrates danger. Artificial additives, contaminants, and unsafe chemicals are routinely banned. Extending this logic to ultra-processed foods is not radical but rather consistent with existing public health principles.

**Ethical Arguments for Prohibition**

The ethical justification for banning ultra-processed foods rests on principles of harm prevention, public welfare, and informed consent. First, governments possess a legitimate interest in preventing preventable harm. Public health ethics recognizes that individual freedoms may be restricted when behaviors create widespread societal damage. Laws requiring seat belts, restricting drunk driving, and mandating vaccinations all limit personal freedom to protect public safety.

Second, consumers often lack meaningful informed consent regarding ultra-processed foods. Food companies invest heavily in marketing strategies designed to obscure health risks and maximize consumption. Packaging frequently emphasizes misleading health claims while downplaying harmful ingredients. Moreover, addiction-like properties may impair consumers' ability to make rational choices. If UPFs alter reward systems and encourage compulsive eating, consumers may not exercise fully autonomous decision-making.

Third, social inequalities intensify the ethical concerns surrounding UPFs. Lower-income communities often have greater exposure to cheap ultra-processed foods and reduced access to fresh, nutritious alternatives, living in areas commonly referred to as food swamps (Monda, de Stefano, Villano, Allocca, Casillo, Messina, Monda, Moscatelli, Dipace, Limone, Di Maio, La Marra, Di Padova, Chieffi, Messina, Monda, & Polito, 2024) [8]. As a result, economically disadvantaged populations suffer disproportionately from diet-related disease.

This dynamic raises issues of environmental justice and exploitation (Gottlieb, & Anupama, 2013) [4]. Corporations profit from marketing unhealthy products to vulnerable populations while externalizing healthcare costs onto society. From a utilitarian perspective, banning ultra-processed foods could generate enormous overall benefits. Reduced chronic disease, lower healthcare costs, increased productivity, and longer life expectancy would likely outweigh economic disruptions to food manufacturers.

## Conclusion

Ultra-processed foods (UPFs) are not really food; they are industrial formulations made primarily from substances extracted from foods or synthesized entirely in laboratories. They are composed of refined sugars, industrial oils, flavor enhancers, emulsifiers, artificial colors, preservatives, and other additives rarely used in home cooking. The content of UPFs is bad enough, but they are also shown to alter digestion, satiety, metabolic responses, and eating behavior, and they tend to encourage overconsumption and interfere with normal biological signaling mechanisms that tell people to stop eating when they are full. They are, thus, linked to outcomes such as obesity.

This paper has argued that UPFs should be made illegal because the harms they impose on society are substantial, measurable, and preventable. UPFs are linked to all kinds of bad outcomes, including obesity, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer, depression, and premature mortality. The paper also documented the social costs of UPF consumption, including increased healthcare spending, reduced productivity, and preventable deaths.

If crime is meant to reflect behaviors committed with culpability that harm other people, UPFs should be illegal. Currently, there is no greater threat to the public than UPFs. Given that UPFs are not really food in the first place, banning them would not amount to criminalizing food per se. And action is clearly now required to stop the harms associated with UPFs. Quoting Carlos Monteiro, professor at the University of Sao Paulo: “It’s about the evidence we have today about … ultra-processed foods and human health … What we know right now justifies global public action” (Rigby, 2025) [12]. And to be clear, there are “criminals” involved in the production of these products, meaning there are people who are culpable for the harms outlined in this paper. As noted by the Lancet (2025) [18], the “rise in ultra-processed foods is driven by powerful global corporations who employ sophisticated political tactics to protect and maximise profits.” It is time to hold them accountable for the harms they produce.

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