

LIFESTYLE AS MEDICINE

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WELCOME | LIFESTYLE AS MEDICINE | HEALTH |
ENGLAND



26 Lifestyle messages for Healthcare workers

5. Ultra-processed foods (UPFs) increase disease risk – reducing them is a key preventive strategy.

Why Ultra-Processed Foods Matter

Over the past few decades, diets in many countries have shifted dramatically toward foods that are industrially formulated, convenient, and heavily marketed. These **ultra-processed foods (UPFs)** now make up more than half of total calorie intake in several high-income nations.

For healthcare professionals, understanding the impact of ultra-processed foods is increasingly important. A growing body of research links high consumption of UPFs with poorer health outcomes across multiple systems. Reducing these foods represents one of the most practical, scalable strategies to improve population health.



Teens and babies generally have the highest intake of UPFs- often approaching 85% of all food eaten.

Health Impacts: What the Evidence Shows

Large cohort studies and meta-analyses consistently associate high UPF intake with increased risk of chronic disease. Research links high consumption to:

- **Obesity and weight gain**
- **Type 2 diabetes**
- **Cardiovascular disease**
- **Hypertension**
- **Depression and poorer mental health**
- **Certain cancers**
- **All-cause mortality**

What Are Ultra-Processed Foods?

Ultra-processed foods are industrial formulations made mostly or entirely from substances derived from foods or synthesised in laboratories. They typically contain additives designed to enhance flavour, appearance, shelf life, or texture.

Common characteristics include:

- Multiple ingredients not typically used in home cooking
- Refined starches, added sugars, and industrial fats
- Emulsifiers, flavour enhancers, colourings, and preservatives
- Aggressive marketing and convenient packaging

Examples include:

- Sugary breakfast cereals
- Packaged snacks and confectionery
- Processed meats, Ready meals and instant noodles
- Sweetened beverages
- Many fast foods

These products are designed for **hyper-palatability, convenience, and profitability**, often at the expense of nutritional quality.



Just what is it about UPFs that makes them so dangerous?

1. Nutritional Quality

UPFs tend to be high in refined carbohydrates, unhealthy fats, and sodium while being low in fibre, protein quality, and micronutrients.

2. Overconsumption

Experimental trials show that diets high in UPFs lead to significantly greater calorie intake compared with minimally processed diets, even when macronutrients are matched.

3. Metabolic Effects

Rapidly absorbed carbohydrates and low fibre may worsen glycaemic control, insulin resistance, and lipid metabolism.

4. Food Structure and Satiety

Ultra-processed foods are typically soft, energy dense, and quick to consume, reducing satiety signals and promoting excess intake.

5. Additives and Processing

Emerging evidence suggests some emulsifiers, flavour enhancers, and other additives may affect gut microbiota and metabolic health.

Why This Matters for Population Health

Chronic diseases account for most of the healthcare burden worldwide. Dietary patterns are one of the most powerful modifiable drivers.

Reducing ultra-processed food consumption has the potential to:

- Lower obesity prevalence
- Improve metabolic health
- Reduce cardiovascular risk
- Improve dietary quality across populations
- Reduce healthcare costs associated with chronic disease

Importantly, improving diet quality does not necessarily require complicated nutritional prescriptions. **Simply shifting away from ultra-processed foods toward whole or minimally processed foods can produce meaningful health improvements.**

Practical Guidance for Patient Conversations

Healthcare professionals are uniquely positioned to help patients navigate the modern food environment. Rather than focusing solely on individual nutrients, discussions can emphasise food patterns.

Helpful messages include:

Encourage whole and minimally processed foods

Examples include:

- | | |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Vegetables and fruits• Whole grains• Beans and lentils | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Nuts and seeds• Eggs, fish, and unprocessed meats• Plain dairy products |
|--|---|

Promote simple cooking

Meals prepared from basic ingredients tend to contain fewer additives and better nutrient balance.

Suggest small swaps

- Whole oats instead of sugary cereals
- Nuts or fruit instead of packaged snacks
- Water or unsweetened drinks instead of sugary beverages

Encourage label awareness

A useful rule of thumb: if a food contains many unfamiliar ingredients or additives, it is likely ultra-processed.

1-Minute Ultra-Processed Food (UPF) Self-Audit

Quick Reflection for Newsletter readers:

Purpose:

This quick checklist will help you reflect on their own intake of ultra-processed foods (UPFs). The aim is **awareness, not perfection**. Even brief reflection can improve personal wellbeing and strengthen conversations with patients.

Step 1: Think About What You Ate Yesterday

Tick any items that applied to your day.

- Packaged breakfast cereals or cereal bars
- Flavoured yogurts or dairy desserts
- Packaged snacks (crisps, biscuits, chocolate bars)
- Ready meals or instant noodles
- Processed meats (sausages, hot dogs, deli meats)
- Sugary drinks or energy drinks
- Sweetened coffee drinks
- Fast food or takeaway meals
- Vending machine snacks
- Packaged desserts or baked goods

Reflection:

If you ticked **3 or more**, ultra-processed foods may make up a significant part of your daily intake.

Step 2: Where Do UPFs Appear Most Often?

Tick the areas where ultra-processed foods most commonly occur.

- Breakfast
- Workday snacks
- Lunch at work
- Evening meal
- Late-night eating

Step 3: Why Were These Foods Chosen?

- Convenience
- Time pressure or shift work
- Availability in the workplace
- Stress or fatigue
- Habit
- Cost

Step 4: Identify One Simple Swap

Choose **one realistic change for the coming week.**

Examples:

- Sugary cereal → oats or whole-grain toast
- Packaged snacks → fruit or nuts
- Sugary drinks → water or unsweetened tea/coffee
- Ready meals → simple home-prepared meal
- Bring a simple lunch to work

Write your change:

My small change this week:

Key Message

Ultra-processed foods are common in modern food environments, especially in busy healthcare settings. Recognising them in our own diets helps us:

- Understand the challenges patients face
- Give practical, credible dietary advice
- Support our own health and energy levels

Aim for progress, not perfection.

References:

Book. Chris van Tulleken Ultra-processed People

[Association between consumption of ultra-processed foods and all cause mortality: SUN prospective cohort study | The BMJ](#)

[Ultra-processed food exposure and adverse health outcomes: Umbrella review of epidemiological meta-analyses - Johns Hopkins University](#)

And Finally

I've worked in healthcare settings for a long time, and a challenge I've faced in almost every workplace has been 'how do you make snacks eaten during the working day healthier?'

Doughnuts in the kitchen. Chocolate for the '3pm dip'.

What works in your workplace? And how did you get on with the audit? Let me know 😊

Jen

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