Ultra-processed foods

What consumers need to know about ultra-processed foods.

There has been a lot of public debate recently about ultra-processed foods. Some research has shown a correlation between consuming a lot of ultra-processed foods and poorer health. What has been more challenging is working out why. Some (but not all) ultra-processed foods are high in fat, sugar and salt. It's hard to establish whether this is the sole reason why consuming lots of them can lead to poorer health, or whether there are additional negative health impacts from other factors. For example, palatability (how easy they are to eat and how much we like them, which might lead us to eat more), or energy density (the amount of calories per bite), or how some ultra-processed foods are made. These are some possible causes, but they have not yet been fully explained by the science.

The government's expert scientific committee (the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition or SACN), in its review of the current evidence, said that more research was needed before it could draw any firm conclusions about whether ultra-processed foods cause poor health.

There is a lot of research currently under way in many countries, including the UK, and this is likely to improve our understanding of ultra-processed foods within the next few years.

What is an ultra-processed food?

There is no single, universally agreed definition for ultra-processed foods. The NOVA classification (opens as PDF) (which is the most commonly used) talks about food which contains "formulations of ingredients, mostly of exclusive industrial use, typically created by a series of industrial techniques and processes."

Some people have also defined ultra-processed foods as foods which contain ingredients that you might not find in your kitchen cupboard (for example, types of additives or emulsifiers or stabilisers).

Examples of ultra-processed foods might include sweetened breakfast cereals, carbonated soft drinks or confectionery. They might also include low fat spreads or some flavoured yogurts.

The role of processing in food

Some processing – including some processing used in ultra-processed foods – can play an important role in food safety or nutrition, or in making food cheaper. For example:

- pasteurisation, which kills harmful bacteria
- cooking, which is used to ensure food is edible and safe to consume
- adding vitamins and minerals (for example, adding iron and Vitamin B1 to flour, or calcium to plant-based milks)
- improving the nutritional content of food (reducing saturated fat or sugar or salt content, for example)

Processing can improve the taste or texture of food or increase shelf-life. This can make food more accessible or affordable or help reduce food waste.

Advice for consumers

While there is a correlation between poorer health outcomes and diets that are high in ultra-processed food, we still don't know whether it is because these foods are unhealthy because of how they are made, or if it's because a large majority of processed foods are high in calories, saturated fat, salt and sugar.

However you define ultra-processed foods, the term covers a huge variety of foods, some of which are unhealthy, and some of which may have a lot of nutritional value. For instance, a chocolate bar, or a ready meal that is very high in fat, salt or sugar might be classed as ultra-processed foods, but so would a loaf of shop-bought, wholegrain bread, or a low-fat yogurt.

We do have strong evidence that diets high in calories, saturated fat, salt and sugar are associated with an increased risk of obesity, and chronic diseases such as heart disease and type 2 diabetes, as well as certain types of cancers.

The government's advice is for consumers to try to follow a healthy diet, which for most people means cutting down on how much saturated fat, sugar and salt you eat and eating more vegetables and fibre. The Eatwell Guide (opens as PDF) sets out what a healthy, balanced diet looks like – one that limits saturated fat, salt and sugar, and includes plenty of fruit and vegetables, fibre and protein (including oily fish and pulses). It also shows how much of what we eat overall should come from each food group.

The role of the FSA in relation to ultra-processed foods

We regulate food additives, which are frequently used in ultra-processed food. We are also responsible for some aspects of nutrition and dietary health policy in Northern Ireland. We also have a role, set out in law, in protecting the interests of consumers in relation to food.

Food additives

All food additives must pass a robust assessment to check they are safe for people to eat. An assessment looks at the toxicological profile of a particular additive, its concentration in particular foods, the range of foods in which it is used, and how much we might be exposed to it in our overall diet. We then use that evidence to judge whether the additive is safe, in what quantity, and how it can be used in different products.

When new information comes to light about the safety of a particular additive, we will reassess its safety if necessary, based on the latest scientific evidence.

Some of the most common additives you might come across on food labels include:

- antioxidants – these stop fat becoming rancid or changing colour by reducing the chance of fats combining with oxygen
- food colourings – which might add or restore colour in a food
- emulsifiers, stabilisers, gelling agents and thickeners – these help to mix or thicken ingredients
- preservatives – these are used to keep food safer for longer by slowing the growth of microorganisms
- sweeteners – which make food taste sweeter, and are used to replace sugar in calorie-reduced foods

Protecting consumer interests

We have a role in protecting consumer interests in relation to food. We track consumer perceptions through regular research, such as?Food and You 2?and our?Consumer Insights Tracker.

Broadly, our research shows that people have high levels of confidence in the food they eat. However, since August 2023, ultra-processed, or over-processing of food has consistently ranked among the top prompted concerns in our Consumer Insights Tracker, with around three-quarters of those surveyed reporting concern about this topic each month.

Research we conducted in 2022?also showed high levels (61%) of concern about over-processing of food.

Additionally, our Advisory Committee for Social Science published a rapid scoping review of consumer understanding and concerns about UPFs in 2024. It found that many consumers have heard the term but struggle to define it clearly or to distinguish reliably between foods that are ultra-processed and foods that are not. It also found that people often associate UPFs with industrial processing, artificial ingredients, and foods high in sugar, fat and salt. At the same time, consumers recognise benefits such as convenience, shelf life and price.

The FSA's work on ultra-processed food

We will continue to work closely with the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), as the evidence on ultra-processed food develops. In practice, this means:

- Taking action when any new evidence emerges from the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN) or other scientific committees, and other international regulatory bodies, working with DHSC and the devolved administrations.
- Ensuring the safety of food additives is rigorously assessed.
- Keeping consumers informed about our work on ultra-processed foods.

UKRI: Opinions on ultra-processed foods

UKRI commissioned a public dialogue with support from Sciencewise to explore issues around UPFs that matter most to people and families and where they want research to be prioritised. The FSA contributed through participation in the project management team and oversight group, and by providing specialist input on food regulation and standards during evidence sessions. The research was published in April 2026 and will inform future UKRI research priorities.