

Health Impacts of Ultra-Processed Foods

August 24, 2026

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. Ultra-processed foods are a major contributor to poor diet quality and are associated with increased risk of multiple chronic diseases.
2. Children are especially vulnerable to the health impacts and marketing of ultra-processed foods, making early prevention important.
3. Policies that strengthen nutrition education, improve healthy food environments, and expand access to nutritious foods can support healthier dietary patterns and reduce chronic disease in Texas.

Background

Ultra-processed foods are a major contributor to chronic disease and rising healthcare costs.¹

Percent of daily calories from UPFs:²



62%

U.S. Children



53%

U.S. Adults

- The NOVA system, a food classification framework, classifies foods by the degree and purpose of industrial processing, distinguishing minimally processed foods from highly processed foods.^{1,3,4}
 - Ultra-processed foods (UPFs) are made primarily from refined ingredients, food-derived substances, and additives, with little or no intact whole food remaining.⁵
 - UPFs commonly contain emulsifiers, artificial flavors, colorings, sweeteners, preservatives, and flavor enhancers designed to improve taste, convenience, and shelf life.⁵

Examples of Ultra-Processed Foods:¹



sugar-sweetened
beverages



ready-to-heat
meals



candies



packaged snacks



processed meats



sweetened
breakfast cereals

Health Impacts of Ultra-Processed Foods

Higher UPF consumption has been linked to multiple chronic diseases and poorer diet quality.

- People consuming diets high in UPFs tend to eat more calories per day than those consuming less processed diets and their diets have lower nutrition quality.⁶
- Negative health outcomes from UPF consumption and exposure to food additives include chronic inflammation, insulin resistance, and disruption of the gut microbiome.^{5,7}
- Higher UPF intake is associated with increased overall cancer risk, particularly colorectal cancer, and may include breast and pancreatic cancer risk.⁸

42%

cancers in the United States are attributable to modifiable risk factors, including poor diet, obesity, physical inactivity, tobacco use, and alcohol consumption.¹¹

Increased UPF consumption is associated with increased risk of: ⁶⁻¹⁰



Obesity



Cardiovascular Disease



Hypertension



Depression



Type 2 Diabetes

Diets higher in UPFs generally contain: ⁵

Higher amounts of:



sodium



added sugars



saturated & trans fats



refined carbohydrates

Lower amounts of:



fiber



vitamins



minerals

Limiting Ultra-Processed Foods in Children

Childhood is a critical period for establishing lifelong eating habits, yet U.S. children consume the highest proportion of calories from UPFs.

- High UPF intake is associated with childhood obesity, poor cardiometabolic health, elevated blood pressure, and lower diet quality.^{7,13}
- Expanding children's access to minimally processed foods through schools, childcare, community programs like gardens, and culinary nutrition education can foster healthy eating skills and lifelong dietary habits.^{7,13}

Children are especially susceptible to the marketing of ultra-processed foods through: ¹²



television



product packaging



digital media



Early dietary patterns often persist into adulthood, making childhood an important opportunity for chronic disease prevention. ¹⁴⁻¹⁵

Recent State Legislation

Texas has recently enacted several nutrition-focused policies that emphasize improving dietary quality, increasing nutrition education, and promoting transparency around highly processed foods.

Senate Bill 25 (2025), with provisions taking effect beginning in 2027, establishes initiatives to improve nutrition and reduce diet-related chronic disease by: ¹⁵

- establishing the Texas Nutrition Advisory Committee, and directing the advisory committee to evaluate the health effects of ultra-processed foods and additives,
- expanding nutrition education for healthcare professionals,
- requiring warning labels on foods containing specified food additives, and
- supporting statewide efforts to improve nutrition literacy and evaluate the health impacts of ultra-processed foods.



Senate Bill 314 (2025) strengthens school nutrition policies by: ¹⁶

- prohibiting specified artificial food additives in meals served through participating school meals programs,
- reducing children's exposure to additives commonly found in highly processed foods, and
- supporting healthier school food environments that encourage lifelong healthy eating habits.

Senate Bill 379 (2025) strengthens food transparency and consumer awareness by: ¹⁷

- requiring warning labels on certain food products that contain specified artificial colors, additives, and other ingredients,
- helping consumers identify products containing ingredients that may be associated with health concerns, and
- supporting informed food choices by increasing transparency about ingredients in the food supply.

House Bill 26 (2025) strengthens nutrition-related health services by: ¹⁸

- expanding access to nutrition support services through Medicaid managed care,
- promoting nutrition as a strategy for preventing and managing chronic disease, and
- supporting evidence-based approaches to improve dietary quality among Texans.

Recent Federal Legislation

The Make America Healthy Again (MAHA) initiative prioritizes nutrition policy as a strategy for addressing chronic disease.¹⁹

The MAHA initiative has prioritized: ¹⁹

- improving nutrition,
- increasing transparency around food ingredients,
- encouraging research on the health effects of highly processed foods as part of broader efforts to address chronic disease.

Policy Recommendations

1. **Expand Nutrition Education for Healthcare Professionals:** Build upon Texas Senate Bill 25 (2025) by expanding data-driven nutrition education for healthcare professionals to improve counseling on reducing UPF consumption.
2. **Strengthen School Nutrition Policies:** Expand healthy school meals, nutrition education, and access to minimally processed foods while reducing children's exposure to UPF.
3. **Improve Public Nutrition Literacy:** Invest in statewide nutrition education campaigns that help Texans identify UPFs, interpret food labels, and make healthier dietary choices.
4. **Increase Access to Healthy Foods:** Improve access to affordable, nutritious foods through farmer's markets, local agriculture, healthy food financing, and nutrition assistance programs.
5. **Invest in Nutrition Research and Program Evaluation:** Support research and program evaluation to identify effective nutrition policies and reduce diet-related chronic disease in Texas.

Experts

Deanna Hoelscher, PhD, RDN, LD, CNS, FISBNPA

UTHealth Houston School of Public Health

Nalini Ranjit, PhD

UTHealth Houston School of Public Health

Dolores Woods, MA, RD, LD

UTHealth Houston School of Public Health, Nourish Program

Shreela Sharma, PhD, RDN, LD

UTHealth Houston School of Public Health

Diana Guevara, MPH, RD, LD

UTHealth Houston School of Public Health

Erin Hudson, JD, PhD

University of Texas at Austin

Content development and research for this report were led by UTHealth Houston School of Public Health Postdoctoral Fellow Shelby Flores-Thorpe, PhD and UTHealth School of Public Health masters student Brisa Carroll.

For further information, please contact TXRPCNetwork@uth.tmc.edu.

References

1. Andrews L. Ultra-Processed Foods and Cancer: What's the Connection? May 3, 2024. <https://www.aicr.org/resources/blog/ultra-processed-foods-and-cancer-whats-the-connection/>
2. Products - Data Briefs - Number 536 - August 2025. September 2, 2025. doi:10.15620/cdc/174612
3. Ultraprocessed Foods in the U.S.: Recommended Definitions and Policies. Healthy Eating Research. Accessed July 27, 2026. <https://healthyeatingresearch.org/research/ultraprocessed-foods-in-the-u-s-recommended-definitions-and-policies/>
4. Ultraprocessed Foods in the U.S.: Recommended Definitions and Policies. Healthy Eating Research. Accessed July 27, 2026. <https://healthyeatingresearch.org/research/ultraprocessed-foods-in-the-u-s-recommended-definitions-and-policies/>
5. Monteiro CA, Cannon G, Levy RB, et al. Ultra-processed foods: what they are and how to identify them. *Public Health Nutr.* 2019;22(5):936-941. doi:10.1017/S1368980018003762
6. Hall KD, Ayuketah A, Brychta R, et al. Ultra-Processed Diets Cause Excess Calorie Intake and Weight Gain: An Inpatient Randomized Controlled Trial of Ad Libitum Food Intake. *Cell Metab.* 2019;30(1):67-77.e3. doi:10.1016/j.cmet.2019.05.008
7. Lane MM, Gamage E, Du S, et al. Ultra-processed food exposure and adverse health outcomes: umbrella review of epidemiological meta-analyses. *BMJ.* 2024;384:e077310. doi:10.1136/bmj-2023-077310
8. Islami F, Goding Sauer A, Miller KD, et al. Proportion and number of cancer cases and deaths attributable to potentially modifiable risk factors in the United States. *CA Cancer J Clin.* 2018;68(1):31-54. doi:10.3322/caac.21440
9. Pagliai G, Dinu M, Madarena MP, Bonaccio M, Iacoviello L, Sofi F. Consumption of ultra-processed foods and health status: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Br J Nutr.* 125(3):308-318. doi:10.1017/S0007114520002688
10. Delpino FM, Figueiredo LM, Bielemann RM, et al. Ultra-processed food and risk of type 2 diabetes: a systematic review and meta-analysis of longitudinal studies. *Int J Epidemiol.* 2022;51(4):1120-1141. doi:10.1093/ije/dyab247
11. Policies to protect children from the harmful impact of food marketing: WHO guideline. Accessed July 27, 2026. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240075412>
12. Mendes E. More than 4 in 10 cancers and cancer deaths linked to modifiable risk factors. American Cancer Society. Published November 21, 2017. Accessed August 24, 2026. <https://www.cancer.org/research/acs-research-news/more-than-4-in-10-cancers-and-cancer-deaths-linked-to-modifiable-risk-factors.html>
13. U.S. Department of Agriculture, & U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2020). *Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020–2025* (9th ed.). <https://www.dietaryguidelines.gov/>
14. CDC. Good Nutrition Starts Early. Nutrition. April 21, 2026. Accessed July 27, 2026. <https://www.cdc.gov/nutrition/features/good-nutrition-starts-early.html>
15. Texas Legislature Online. History for 89(R) Text for SB 25. Accessed July 27, 2026. <https://capitol.texas.gov/BillLookup/Text.aspx?LegSess=89R&Bill=SB25>
16. Texas Legislature Online. History for 89(R) Text for HB 26. Accessed July 27, 2026. <https://capitol.texas.gov/BillLookup/Text.aspx?LegSess=89R&Bill=HB26>
17. Texas Legislature Online. History for 89(R) History for SB 314. Accessed July 27, 2026. <https://capitol.texas.gov/BillLookup/History.aspx?LegSess=89R&Bill=SB314>
18. Texas Legislature Online. History for 89(R) SB 379 by Middleton. Accessed August 24, 2026. <https://capitol.texas.gov/BillLookup/History.aspx?LegSess=89R&Bill=SB379>
19. MAHA. The White House. Accessed July 27, 2026. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/maha/>

Suggested Citation

Flores-Thorpe S, Carroll B, Hudson E, Guevara D, Woods, D, Ranjit N, Sharma SV, Zhang Y, Menendez T, Linton R, van den Berg AE, Hoelscher, DM. Health Impacts of Highly Processed Foods. A report of the Texas Research-to-Policy Collaboration Project. UTHealth Houston School of Public Health in Austin, Michael & Susan Dell Center for Healthy Living. Published August 24, 2024.