

# Are highly processed foods bad for children?

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A new study found that children ages 3 to 5 who consumed more ultraprocessed foods had poorer locomotor skills than children who consumed less of these foods. It also showed lower cardiovascular fitness in 12- to 15-year-olds who consumed more ultraprocessed foods.

Although previous research has shown that consuming ultraprocessed foods is linked with a higher risk for [cardiovascular disease](#) in adults,

this is one of the first studies to show a link between consumption of these foods and lower levels of physical fitness in children.

Ultraprocessed foods were categorized in this study as including packaged snacks, [breakfast cereals](#), candies, soda, sweetened juices and yogurts, canned soups and prepared foods like pizza, hotdogs, burgers and chicken nuggets.

"Healthy dietary and exercise behaviors are established at a very young age," said research team leader Jacqueline Vernarelli, Ph.D., associate professor and director for the Master of Public Health program at Sacred Heart University. "Our findings point to the need to educate families about cost-effective ways to reduce ultraprocessed food intake to help decrease the risk for cardiovascular health problems in adulthood."

Vernarelli will present the findings online at Nutrition 2022 Live Online, the flagship [annual meeting](#) of the American Society for Nutrition held June 14-16.

To examine the association between physical fitness and ultraprocessed foods during various stages of childhood, the researchers analyzed data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) National Youth Fitness Survey.

This 2012 survey used interviews and fitness tests to collect data on physical activity, fitness levels and [food intake](#) for more than 1,500 U.S. children aged 3 to 15. Ultra-processed foods were identified using NOVA, which categorizes food and beverage items according to the level of food processing.

For children 5 years old and under, the researchers used locomotor development as a measure of physical fitness. The analysis revealed that children with the lowest locomotor development scores consumed 273

calories more per day of ultraprocessed foods than children with the highest locomotor development scores.

Cardiovascular fitness was used as a [physical fitness](#) measure in the older children. The study showed that teens and preteens with good cardiovascular fitness consumed 226 fewer calories daily from ultraprocessed foods than those who did not have healthy cardiovascular fitness.

"Though highly processed convenience foods are easy to throw into a school bag, our research shows the importance of preparing healthy snacks and meals," said Vernarelli. "Think of it like saving for retirement: You're making decisions now that will influence your child's future."

As a next step, the researchers plan to look more closely at consumption patterns for ultraprocessed food by age group. For example, do kids eat more of these foods for breakfast, at lunch or for snacks? A better understanding of how and when these foods are consumed could help inform future interventions designed to encourage healthy eating.

**More information:** Conference:  
[nutrition.org/nutrition-2022-live-online/](https://nutrition.org/nutrition-2022-live-online/)

Abstract: [www.dropbox.com/s/xvym2lxojh7osdi/Vernarelli%20abstract.docx?dl=0](https://www.dropbox.com/s/xvym2lxojh7osdi/Vernarelli%20abstract.docx?dl=0)

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