

The health risk raised by ultra-processed foods

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Supermarket shelves are increasingly flooded with foods produced by extensive industrial processing, which are generally low in essential nutrients, high in sugar, oil and salt and liable to be overconsumed. A study by the Department of Epidemiology and Prevention at the IRCCS Neuromed, in Italy, now confirms that these foods are harmful to health.

Published in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, the study included over 22,000 participating citizens who participated in the Moli-sani Project. By analyzing their [eating habits](#) and following their [health conditions](#) for over eight years, Neuromed researchers were able to observe that those consuming a high amount of ultra-processed foods had an increased risk of death from any cause of 26%, and of 58% specifically from cardiovascular diseases.

Marialaura Bonaccio, researcher at the Department of Epidemiology and Prevention and first author of the study, says, "To evaluate the nutrition habits of the Moli-sani participants, we used the international NOVA classification, which characterizes foods on the basis of how much they

undergo extraction, purification or alteration. Those with the highest level of industrial processing fall into the category of ultra-processed foods. According to our observations, people consuming large amounts of these foods have an increased risk of dying from cardiovascular and cerebrovascular diseases."

The main culprit could be sugar, which is added in substantial amounts in ultra-processed foods. But the answer seems more complex. Augusto Di Castelnuovo, epidemiologist of the Department of Epidemiology and Prevention, says, "According to our analyses, the excess of sugar does play a role, but it accounts only for 40% of the increased death risk. Our idea is that an important part is played by industrial processing itself, which is able to induce deep modifications in the structure and composition of nutrients."

Licia Iacoviello, full professor of Hygiene and Public Health at the University of Insubria in Varese, says, "Efforts aimed to lead the population toward a healthier diet can no longer be addressed only by calorie counting or by vague references to the Mediterranean diet. Sure, we obtained good results by those means, but now the battlefield is moving. Young people in particular are increasingly exposed to pre-packaged foods, which are easy to prepare and consume, extremely attractive and generally cheap. This study, and other international studies going in the same direction, tell us that minimally processed foods must be paramount for healthy nutrition. Spending a few more minutes cooking a lunch instead of warming a container in the microwave, or maybe preparing a sandwich for our children instead of putting a pre-packaged snack in their backpack are actions that will reward us over the years."

More information: *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* (2020). [DOI: 10.1093/ajcn/nqaa299](https://doi.org/10.1093/ajcn/nqaa299)

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