

Ultra-processed foods and menopausal health

Ultra-processed food products are defined as those containing at least one ingredient that is never or rarely used in kitchens. There is increasing concern about the potential adverse effects of these foods on health.

Ultra-processed foods tend to be high-energy-dense products, high in sugar, unhealthy fats and salt, and low in dietary fiber, protein, vitamins and minerals.

Effects on health and menopause symptoms

Observational studies have associated the consumption of ultra-processed foods with increased risks of the following:

- obesity
- hypertension
- heart disease
- stroke
- metabolic syndrome
- dyslipidemia
- cancer
- early death
- more intense menopausal hot flashes

It is uncertain whether the adverse effects on health are related to **calorific content** or to **additives**.

NOVA classification of foods and food products

- **NOVA group 1.** Unprocessed foods with no added ingredients – fruit, vegetables, milk, cereals, meat.
- **NOVA group 2.** Foods containing processed culinary ingredients obtained directly from group 1 foods or from nature, such as oils, sugar and salt by industrial processes (e.g. pressing, centrifugation, refining).
- **NOVA group 3.** Processed foods made by combining foods from groups 1 and 2 using preservation methods such as canning and bottling, and non-alcoholic fermentation. They include jam, pickles, tinned fruit and vegetables, as well as homemade breads and cheeses.
- **NOVA group 4.** Ultra-processed foods that contain additives and ingredients from industrial processes (e.g. preservatives, emulsifiers, sweeteners, artificial colorings and flavorings).

Ultra-processed foods make up a significant proportion of total dietary energy intake in high- and middle-income countries.

Further information

British Heart Foundation. Ultra-processed foods: how bad are they for your health? <https://www.bhf.org.uk/informationsupport/heart-matters-magazine/news/behind-the-headlines/ultra-processed-foods>

Chang et al. (2023) Ultra-processed food consumption, cancer risk and cancer mortality: a large-scale prospective analysis within the UK Biobank <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eclinm.2023.101840>

Monteiro et al. (2019) Ultra-processed foods: what they are and how to identify them <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1368980018003762>

Noll et al. (2022) Life habits of postmenopausal women: Association of menopause symptom intensity and food consumption by degree of food processing <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.maturitas.2021.10.015>