

Menopause and diet:

Ultra-processed foods

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 energy-dense, high in sugar, unhealthy fats and salt, and low in dietary fiber, protein, vitamins and minerals.

Ultra-processed foods may exacerbate menopausal symptoms and health risks.

Effects on health and menopause symptoms

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

- Obesity, metabolic syndrome and dyslipidemia
- Hypertension, heart disease and stroke
- Cancer
- Early death
- More intense somatic symptoms such as menopausal hot flashes
- Sleep, memory and concentration problems

It is uncertain whether these adverse effects are related to **calorific content** or to **additives**.

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

NOVA classification

- **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)

Further information

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>

González-Gil et al. (2025). Associations between degree of food processing and all-cause and cause-specific mortality: a multicentre prospective cohort analysis in 9 European countries <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lanepe.2024.101208>

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>