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Ultra-Processed Foods and Human Health—Lancet Series Summary

In November 2025, the Lancet published a series on ultra-processed foods (UPFs) that presents a comprehensive analysis of UPF production and consumption's impact on human health, the structural drivers behind their global rise and strategies for reversing this trend. Across three papers, the authors argue that UPFs—industrial formulations high in additives and low in whole foods—are displacing traditional diets worldwide, degrading diet quality and increasing the risk of multiple chronic diseases. This series argues that UPFs' presence in human diets is a major challenge for global public health, and that coordinated public policies and collective actions are urgently needed to curb their growing impact.

1. "Ultra-processed foods and human health: the main thesis and evidence," by Montiero et al., reviewed global evidence using systematic reviews, meta-analyses and sales data from 93 countries to test three hypotheses: 1) ultra-processed diet has displaced, and continues to displace, long established eating patterns; 2) UPF eating patterns degrade various aspects of dietary quality related to chronic diseases; 3) exposure to ultra-processed diet increases risk of multiple diet-related chronic diseases.

   Key Findings:

   - **UPFs displace long-established eating patterns**
     - In the fifteen years between 2007 and 2022, annual per capita sales of UPFs increased in South Asia, Southeast Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, Central Europe, Eastern Asia, North Africa and the Middle East.
     - National food intake surveys from 36 countries show that daily consumption of UPFs ranged from 9% to 60% in recent years. In some middle- and high-income countries, UPF consumption is associated with socioeconomic status, with low-income groups typically consuming more and higher-income groups consuming less.
     - Over the past 30 to 40 years, people in most middle-and high-income countries have been getting more of their energy intake from UPFs. In Spain, for example, the share of household energy coming from UPFs nearly tripled over three decades, rising from 11% to 34%.

   - **UPFs degrade diet quality**
     - National surveys, large cohorts and three interventional studies consistently showed that diets high in UPFs degrade diet quality, with high UPF intake sharply reducing consumption of fruit, vegetables and legumes.
     - UPF intake was associated with higher levels of harmful substances in the body, including toxic compounds and endocrine-disrupting chemicals from food processing and packaging. Further, diets heavy in UPFs contain

additives, emulsifiers, flavor enhancers, artificial sweeteners, coloring and mixtures that may be harmful to health.
    - UPFs are energy-dense, soft in texture, rapidly digestible and designed to be hyperpalatable (high levels of sugar, fat, sodium and other flavor enhancers combine to make them extremely appealing to taste, triggering strong pleasure and reward responses in the brain). Together, these characteristics of UPFs make it easy to eat more calories without feeling full.

- **Diets high in UPFs increase health risks**
    - Prospective studies showed strong evidence that UPFs are linked to chronic diseases. Ninety-two studies (out of 104) found that exposure to ultra-processed diet led to an increased risk of chronic diseases.
    - High UPF consumption was found to be associated with obesity, type 2 diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, kidney disease, Crohn's disease, depression and higher all-cause mortality.
    - Short-term trials show UPF diets cause weight and fat gain even when calories and nutrients are the same as a minimally processed diet.
    - The harm from UPFs goes beyond poor nutrition and includes other factors such as hyperpalatability, high calorie density, lack of protective plant compounds, and exposure to toxic chemicals from processing or packaging.

2. "Policies to halt and reverse the rise of ultra-processed food production, marketing, and consumption," by Scrinis, Popkin and Corvalan et al., synthesized policy literature and organized findings into four domains to address the systematic drivers of UPF production, marketing and consumption: UPF products, food environments, UPF manufacturers and fast food and food supply chains.

Key Findings:

- Researchers recommended policies for each domain:
    - **UPF products**
        - Including UPF markers such as classes of nonnutritive sweeteners, flavors and colorants in nutrient profiling models can help policies capture most UPFs, rather than focusing only on nutrients and ingredients of concern like sugar, sodium, saturated fat, trans fat which leave out many ultra-processed foods.
    - **Food environments**
        - Mandatory front-of-package warning labels are an effective policy to discourage UPF consumption. Researchers noted the importance of prohibiting nutrient and health claims on UPFs with warning labels to avoid confusing consumers.
            a. Researchers recommend that warning labels be added to all UPF and foods high in fat, sugar and salt targeted at infants

and toddlers, since most of those products are not included in current regulations.

b. Ideally, countries will align a labeling policy with other mutually reinforcing policy approaches (as in Chile and Colombia).

- Marketing restrictions and FOPL aimed at infants and toddlers (i.e., breast milk substitutes, toddler milk, etc.) should be more strictly enforced and expanded to cover children up to three years old.
- Taxes on UPFs should be earmarked for programs that help promote healthier diets. Revenues should be used for subsidies on fresh and minimally processed foods, potable water and freshly prepared meals or cash transfers.
- Warning labels should be used on fast food menus, and there should be taxes on fast-food products as well.

- **Manufactures and Fast Food**
  - Food corporations have created the UPF technology and dominated sales, policy making, marketing and political control. This section focused on the need to create global or regional control of these corporate practices.
  - Food procurement programs should restrict UPFs in all public institutions, including schools, hospitals and health care, childcare and military setting**.**
  - Researchers highlight the need for regulations beyond specific UPF products or practices to include the whole operational scope of UPF corporations. This includes their brand portfolios, marketing strategies and sales structure. Policies should target the broader role of UPF corporations within food systems through anti-trust regulations that restrict mergers and acquisition to help prevent a few companies from controlling most of the market share.
    - To curb excessive corporate profits and help government better fund food and nutrition policies, experts recommended enforcing tax obligations and setting minimum corporate tax rates. This aligns with the UN's proposal for a 15 percent global minimum tax on large multinational companies, aimed at preventing tax competition among other countries and ensuring a baseline level of corporate tax.

- **Food supply chains**
  - The authors recommend reforming international trade rules to curb UPF sales and corporate power by adding public health exceptions, reducing special legal protections for foreign investors, eliminating systems that let corporations sue governments in international courts and protecting local food markets.
  - The authors also recommended implementing measures like taxes on single use-plastics, packaging restrictions and water-use regulations to address resource use and pollution from UPF production.

3. Finally, "Towards unified global action on ultra-processed foods: understanding commercial determinants, countering corporate power, and mobilizing a public health response," by Baker, Slater, White, et al., applied a political and economic approach, combining literature review, regional workshops, interviews and corporate influence mapping showing that a key driver to of the global rise of UPFs is the growing economic and political power of the UPF industry.

Key findings:

- A key driver of the global rise of UPFs is the growing economic and political power of the UPF industry. Between 2009 and 2023, global UPF sales rose from $1.5 trillion to $1.9 trillion, driven by rapid growth in low- and middle-income countries.
- The market is dominated by corporations headquartered in North America and Western Europe that control 42% of industry assets, including Nestlé, PepsiCo, Unilever, Coca-Cola, Danone, FEMSA, Mondelez and Kraft Heinz. In 2024, Coca-Cola, PepsiCo and Mondelez spent $13.2 billion on advertising—nearly four times the World Health Organization's annual budget.
- The UPF industry uses three forms of corporate political power to block regulation:
  - Direct corporate action: lobbying, political financing, government infiltration and litigation.
  - Corporate institutions: promoting corporate-friendly governance models, self-regulation and civil societies (i.e., funding NGOs and community programs to divide opposition).
  - Corporate ideas: framing debates, deflecting blame and manufacturing scientific doubt.

- Recommendations to reduce the food industry's power over the food system:
  - Disrupt the UPF business model by ending subsidies, implementing taxes, enforcing anti-trust laws and regulating marketing.
  - Work to protect governance by adopting conflict-of-interest safeguards, banning industry involvement in policy making and reforming Codex standards.
  - Mobilize global action by prioritizing UPFs as a global health issue, establishing a coordinated global response and organizing country level coalitions to generate political commitment.
  - Support local food systems by adopting participatory governance to ensure civil society, local food producers and affected communities are central in decision-making. Policies should aim to strengthen food markets that provide jobs and secure livelihoods for diverse local producers and ensure that public institutions provide nutritious culturally appropriate foods and meals.

Key Messages:

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- UPFs are a major global health challenge. These products dominate diets in many countries, displacing traditional food patterns and contributing to poor diet quality and multiple chronic diseases.
- A key driver of the global rise of UPFs is the growing economic and political power of the UPF industry, which uses lobbying, litigation and partnerships to block regulation and shape policy in their favor.
- To combat the rising trends in consumption of UPFs countries need to adopt mandatory UPF policies (i.e., front-of-pack warning labels, marketing restrictions, taxes on UPFs and sweetened beverages, etc.). To truly protect public health, governments need to push the envelope further to regulate harmful additives and ultra-processing markers.
- Reforms of agriculture subsidies and trade rules are essential to increase affordability and availability of minimally processed foods and shift diets away from UPF.

Please see infographic here.
Please see videos of key findings and recommendations from the authors.

Citations:

Monteiro, C. A., Louzada, M. L., Steele-Martinez, E., Cannon, G., Andrade, G. C., Baker, P., ... & Touvier, M. (2025). Ultra-processed foods and human health: the main thesis and the evidence. *The Lancet*. https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(25)01565-X/abstract

Scrinis, G., Popkin, B. M., Corvalan, C., Duran, A. C., Nestle, M., Lawrence, M., ... & Khandpur, N. (2025). Policies to halt and reverse the rise in ultra-processed food production, marketing, and consumption. *The Lancet*. https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(25)01566-1/abstract

Baker, P., Slater, S., White, M., Wood, B., Contreras, A., Corvalán, C., ... & Barquera, S. (2025). Towards unified global action on ultra-processed foods: understanding commercial determinants, countering corporate power, and mobilising a public health response. *The Lancet*. https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(25)01567-3/abstract