ULTRA-PROCESSED

FOODS

ALETHEIA
IL SEGRETO DEL BUON VIVERE

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Preface

In recent years, much attention has been paid by the media to the numerous scientific evidence that indicates the close correlation between the systematic consumption of Ultra-Processed Foods (UPFs) and the spread of obesity mainly affecting younger age groups and other various chronic diseases. This real health emergency affects both rich and poor countries, spreading above all due to the lack of awareness of the risks associated with the consumption of these foods.

Their diffusion is facilitated by the possibility of combining low costs and high palatability, obtained thanks to a long list of additives that offer flavour, smell, texture and colour to much of what we eat. Ultimately, in the product purchased there is often little or none of the original ingredient that should be the basis, with the role of “cosmetics” obtained through chemical processing being increasingly central. It is precisely the presence of these substances that makes these products different from the rest of the food, principally because they are more risky for human health.

The consequences that are falling on health systems could be devastating. Indeed, many governments are working to adopt specific measures aimed at limiting the consumption of UPFs, especially by children and adolescents. The issue of UPFs has become an emergency today because our diets often see the massive and systematic contribution of these products.

A Global Emergency

The world of research and more generally of medicine widely agrees that the excessive and systematic consumption of UPFs is now a **global health emergency**.

One of the more recent studies took into account the most relevant surveys of the last three years, which in total involved about 10 million individuals worldwide. The result is a **direct link between the consumption of UPFs and 32 adverse health effects affecting in particular gastrointestinal, metabolic, respiratory and cardiovascular health**.

Children and teenagers are especially at risk. A group of researchers from the Universities of Cambridge and Bristol observed the eating behaviours of about 3,000 adolescents in the UK and estimated that almost **70% of the energy consumed came from the consumption of UPFs**.

In the **United States**, the caloric intake provided by UPFs is estimated to be on average greater than **60%** of the total. One of the most representative surveys in Europe – involving 22 countries, including Italy – estimated the caloric contribution of UPFs at around **40%** of the total for **Sweden and the United Kingdom**, compared to around **33%** in the **Netherlands**. The lowest value belongs to **Italy** with an average contribution of **12%**.

Let's start with the names. Why Ultra-Processed?

The NOVA system is the most widely used scientific tool for classifying foods on the basis of the characteristics of the production process. The latter identifies four categories of food, including “ultra-processed”.

The adverb “ultra” separates this group of foods from all other foods, but does not – in our opinion – give the sense of the profound diversity that separates the two worlds. The divide is that belonging to the “ultra” category implies evaluations that go beyond the confines of nutritional parameters since we are talking about the intervention of substances that have additional and different implications for human health. Therefore, starting from the names, there is a communicative need to more clearly demarcate this category of foods, whose composition includes products that have nothing to do with the plant or animal product that should be their basis.

It should also be remembered that the NOVA classification does not discriminate on the basis of the process but on the basis of the formulation and ingredients used, with the term “ultra-processed” risking that an undue negative perception in the consumer be generated regarding food technologies and processing methods.

Hence the hypothesis of using the term “ultra-processed” that best explains the distance of these foods from the conventional agricultural-food system. The use of the term “ultra-processed” more effectively transfers the proximity of these products to the world of food chemistry, whose purpose is to make these products ultra-appealing, acting on texture, smell, taste and colour.

Distinguish Ultra-Processed Foods

How do we recognise an ultra-processed food?

Simply by reading the list of ingredients! In the presence of substances that we would hardly find in our kitchen, it is likely that we are dealing with an ultra-processed food. For example different varieties of modified oils, such as hydrogenated or interesterified oil, different protein sources, such as hydrolysed proteins, soy protein isolates, gluten, various sugar sources, such as fructose, inverted sugar and dextrose. Then there are the so-called cosmetic additives, aimed at giving shape, texture, smell and taste to food, such as artificial flavours, flavour enhancers, colourants, emulsifiers, sweeteners, thickeners, anti-foaming agents, gelling agents and coating agents.

One example to better clarify is bread. A baker's bread will be made of water, flour, salt and yeast. The bread we find in the supermarket undoubtedly contains additional ingredients. In some cases, there may be the addition of sorbic acid, a preservative of natural origin hence we are still in the realm of non-ultra-processed products. In others, the list of ingredients can be very long, even exceeding 20 ingredients, including substances such as dextrose, glucose and gluten. In this case, we have definitely moved to the field of ultra-processing. For some categories of food, the probability of being faced with an ultra-processed product is very high. Let's talk about ready-made foods, sweet and savoury snacks plus carbonated soft drinks.

Still, as we have seen, it is not always so simple and intuitive to identify an ultra-processed food. We should be able to identify them through a distinctive marking or statement in order to limit their consumption.

NON-PROCESSED FOODS	Examples
Non-processed	Fresh, squeezed, chilled, frozen or dried fruit, vegetables, grains, legumes, tubers, meat, poultry, fish and seafood, whole cuts or steaks, fillets and other cuts of meat, be it, chilled or frozen; eggs; fresh or pasteurised milk; fresh or pasteurised fruit or vegetable juices (without the addition of sugars, sweeteners or artificial flavourings); fresh or pasteurised yoghurt, pasta, polenta and much more.
Processed culinary ingredients	Vegetable oils from seeds, nuts or fruit (especially olives); butter and lard; sugar and molasses obtained from cane or beet; starches extracted from corn and other plants and salt extracted or derived from seawater, vegetable oils with the addition of antioxidants and cooking salt with the addition of drying agents.
Processed foods	Canned, jarred or pickled vegetables and legumes; salted or sweetened nuts and seeds; salted, dried, aged or smoked meats and fish; canned fish (with or without added preservatives); syrupy fruit (with or without added antioxidants); non-packaged fresh bread and cheeses.

PROCESSED FOODS	Examples
Ultra-processed foods	Sparkling beverages; packaged sweet or savoury snacks; mass packaged candy, bread and focaccia; margarine and other spreadable creams; various breakfast cereals, energy bars; energy drinks; meal replacement powders, many ready-to-warm and instant products.

Policies to combat ultra-processed foods

Several countries have taken initiatives to specifically address the expansion of consumption of UPFs.

In particular, Belgium, Canada, France, New Zealand, Qatar, Brazil, Ecuador, Israel, Maldives, Peru and Uruguay specifically discourage the consumption of UPFs in their national dietary guidelines.

Similarly, guidelines adopted by Canada recommend limiting ultra-processed foods and beverages. Colombia has taken further steps in the fight against UPFs, launching a food tax on UPFs in 2023, introducing an additional 10% tax, set to rise to 25% in 2025. Israel and Mexico, rather, have adopted labels that identify beverages containing sweeteners.

Finally, a few days ago, the United Kingdom's new Labour government announced that, starting from 1st October 2025, it will prohibit the **airing of commercials promoting junk foods** (carbonated drinks, savoury snacks, sweets, etc.).

Proposals to limit the consumption of Ultra-Processed Foods

- Development of awareness campaigns in schools and through the media, aimed at disseminating knowledge about the dangers associated with the systematic and continuous intake of UPFs;

- Identification of limits on or bans of the supply and consumption of UPFs in school and public canteens;

- Identification of limits on advertising concerning UPFs, following the example of the United Kingdom, which has banned the time slots of greatest exposure for children and adolescents;

- Definition of forms of labelling aimed at highlighting the possible belonging of a food product to the category of UPFs.

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