

Too much ultra-processed foods linked to lower heart health

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Ultra-processed foods, which account for more than half of an average American's daily calories, are linked to lower measures of cardiovascular health, according to preliminary research to be presented at the

American Heart Association's Scientific Sessions 2019—November 16-18 in Philadelphia..

Researchers at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found that for every 5% increase in calories from ultra-processed foods a person ate, there was a corresponding decrease in overall cardiovascular health. Adults who ate approximately 70% of their calories from ultra-processed foods were half as likely to have "ideal" cardiovascular health, as defined by the American Heart Association's Life's Simple 7®, compared with people who ate 40% or less of their calories from ultra-processed foods.

Foods were categorized into groups by the extent and purpose of industrial processing they undergo. Ultra-processed foods are made entirely or mostly from substances extracted from foods, such as fats, starches, hydrogenated fats, added sugar, modified starch and other compounds and include cosmetic additives such as artificial flavors, colors or emulsifiers. Examples include [soft drinks](#), packaged salty snacks, cookies, cakes, processed meats, chicken nuggets, powdered and packaged instant soups and many items often marketed as "convenience foods."

"Healthy diets play an important role in maintaining a [healthy heart](#) and [blood vessels](#)," said Zefeng Zhang, M.D., Ph.D., an epidemiologist at the CDC. "Eating ultra-processed foods often displaces healthier foods that are rich in nutrients, like fruit, vegetables, whole grains and lean protein, which are strongly linked to good heart health. In addition, ultra-processed foods are often high in salt, added sugars, saturated fat and other substances associated with increasing the risk of heart disease."

Using data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) collected between 2011 and 2016, researchers at the CDC reviewed the results from 13,446 adults, 20 years of age and older, who

completed a 24-hour dietary recall and answered questions about their cardiovascular health.

Cardiovascular health is defined by the American Heart Association's Life's Simple 7 as measures of healthy blood pressure, cholesterol and blood glucose levels, avoidance of tobacco products, good nutrition, healthy body weight and adequate physical activity.

"This study underscores the importance of building a healthier diet by eliminating foods such as sugar-sweetened beverages, cookies, cakes and other processed foods," said Donna Arnett, Ph.D., past-president of the American Heart Association and dean of the College of Public Health at the University of Kentucky in Lexington. "There are things you can do every day to improve your health just a little bit. For example, instead of grabbing that loaf of white bread, grab a loaf of bread that's whole grain or wheat bread. Try replacing a hamburger with fish once or twice a week. Making small changes can add up to better heart health."

Provided by American Heart Association

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