

# Ultra-processed foods increase cardiometabolic risk in children, study finds

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A study led by the University of Rovira i Virgili's (URV) Human Nutrition Unit has associated the consumption of ultra-processed foods products with a greater risk of overweight, increased blood sugar and

worse levels of good cholesterol.

A high consumption of ultra-processed foods during childhood is associated with worse cardiometabolic health. This is the main conclusion of a study led by a research team from the URV's Human Nutrition Unit in collaboration with the Pere Virgili Health Research Institute (IISPV) and the Biomedical Research Networking Centre, Physiopathology of Obesity and Nutrition (CIBEROBN).

The research was conducted on boys and girls between 3 and 6 years old and the main results were [published](#) in the journal *JAMA Network Open*.

Ultra-processed foods tend to be high in saturated fat, sugar, salt, additives and pollutants, while poor in nutrients. Even so, pastries, [soft drinks](#), milkshakes and snacks are often part of children's diets.

To study their effect on health in the first years of life, the research evaluated how the consumption of these products affects a population of more than 1,500 boys and girls aged 3 to 6 from various places (Reus, Córdoba, Santiago de Compostela, Navarra Valencia, Barcelona and Zaragoza), which are taking part in the CORALS multicentre study.

The results showed that children who consumed more ultra-processed foods had higher scores on parameters such as [body mass index](#), waist circumference, fat mass index and blood sugar levels. They also had lower levels of HDL cholesterol—regarded as good cholesterol—in their blood.

"Our findings give cause for concern," says Nancy Babio, principal researcher of the study. "Although the magnitude of the associations we found could be thought to be of limited clinical importance, the boys and girls taking part in our study were very young but, even so, there was a significant relationship between their consumption and these

parameters," she adds.

For the research team, these results should be understood as an early warning of what may happen in the future. "It is essential to recognize the importance of early eating habits and their future implications on cardiometabolic health," Babio points out.

The study also shows that the children of mothers with little education or a lower socio-economic level generally consumed more ultra-processed foods, which makes them susceptible to [health problems](#) in the future.

"Taking all this into account, public health policies should be targeting vulnerable populations," says Jordi Salas-Salvadó, director of the research team, who also recommends that these foods should be replaced with healthier options such as unprocessed or minimally processed products.

## **Low price and ready availability**

Ultra-processed foods are increasingly common in the diet. Their ready availability and low price mean that they are widely consumed, especially among children, adolescents and their families, and particularly among those most vulnerable from a socio-economic and educational point of view, who are more prone to obesity.

In this regard, the study underlines the urgency of addressing the problem of the overconsumption of these foods by children and the importance of drafting public policies and adopting preventive measures to protect the long-term health of future generations.

The study was carried out by the following team: doctoral student Nadine Khoury; URV researcher Nancy Babio and URV professor Jordi Salas-Salvadó—both principal researchers of the University's Human

Nutrition Unit—as well as postdoctoral researcher María Ángeles Martínez (the three supervisors of Nadine's doctoral thesis). They are all affiliated to the Pere i Virgili Health Research Institute and the Biomedical Research Networking Centre. Physiopathology of Obesity and Nutrition (CIBERObn) of the Carlos III Health Institute.

**More information:** Nadine Khoury et al, Ultraprocessed Food Consumption and Cardiometabolic Risk Factors in Children, *JAMA Network Open* (2024). [DOI: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2024.11852](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2024.11852)

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