

Ultra-processed food is tasty and easy: Is it bad for you?

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As shoppers study food labels amid renewed concerns about the health impacts of processed food, General Mills isn't worried. After all, it's the flavor that makes the sale.

"Newsflash: People like food that tastes really good," General Mills CEO

Jeff Harmening told an audience of investors recently when asked about the debate around "ultra-processed" foods and how it could affect the Golden Valley, Minnesota-based company.

"That's not to say consumers don't care about nutrition as well," Harmening said, but, "one of the things that General Mills does really well is make food that tastes good and is good for you."

Research shows, however, that too much of certain tasty things may contribute to high rates of diet-related diseases like obesity, cancer and [mental health problems](#).

Now, regulators may start warning against eating too much ultra-processed food—broadly defined as having few or no remaining whole-food ingredients—and industry groups are lining up in opposition.

Starting next year, federal [dietary guidelines](#) could, for the first time, address the role ultra-[processed foods](#) play in [healthy eating](#). That could trigger changes in federal programs and ripple through America's food industry, which makes billions selling processed foods like Lunchables and frozen pizzas to schools.

"The nutrition quality of the American diet remains quite poor," said Julie Hess, a leading nutrition researcher at the U.S. Department of Agriculture. But at the same time: "We can build a healthy diet with ultra-processed foods."

Nearly 75% of the U.S. food supply is considered ultra-processed, according to the Institute of Food Technologists. Most foods sold in grocery stores go through some level of processing, including staples like milk, bread and flour. Ultra-processed foods, said nutritionist Marion Nestle, are "industrially produced foods formulated to be irresistibly delicious that can't be made in home kitchens."

This category can include many breakfast cereals, yogurts, chicken nuggets and plant-based meat alternatives.

In a letter to the federal Department of Health and Human Services earlier this year, General Mills argued, "Not all processed foods are nutritionally equivalent and do not have the same impact on health."

Yet foods designed to be "hyperpalatable" with high fat, sugar or sodium often displace nutritionally dense foods in diets, studies say.

Food companies have positioned many of their products as health-conscious—such as "heart-healthy" Cheerios—but the main selling points for most packaged food remains taste, price and convenience. The nation's leading food companies, including Kraft, Nestle, Hormel, Post and Land O'Lakes, all sell products that fall into the ultra-processed category.

Processing is "part of a complex food system that helps consumers meet [nutritional needs](#) within their abilities, budget and preferences," General Mills wrote in the letter.

University of Minnesota nutrition professor Joanne Slavin, who served on the 2010 dietary guidelines advisory committee, agrees that processing is a necessary part of modern food production.

"If we get rid of all ultra-processed foods, food waste goes up, food costs go up, and people wouldn't be healthier," she said. "To say, 'avoid ultra-processed foods to prevent disease,' that's really misleading."

The ultra-processed debate comes right as the FDA is considering whether to regulate the term "healthy" on [food labels](#) or add warning labels for foods high in fat, sugar and salt. Harmening said that wouldn't have an effect on General Mills' business even as the company lobbies

against the proposals.

"To the extent that consumers are more knowledgeable and care more about what's in their food, I think that's a benefit for us," he said. "We're happy to compete in that environment."

The Nova rating system, first proposed in 2009, initially brought the term "ultra-processed" to a wide audience. Nova describes processed foods on a scale from 1 to 4, from raw, or minimally processed, to ultra-processed.

Nova's rating scale climbs from whole foods and shelled nuts to culinary ingredients like oil and honey then up to processed foods like potato chips and cheese and ultimately to ultra-processed foods like fish sticks or protein shakes.

A widely cited 2013 study on ultra-processed foods gave this definition: "Ready-to-consume, are entirely or mostly made not from foods, but from industrial ingredients and additives, and are extremely profitable."

Since then, hundreds of studies have explored the link between ultra-processed foods and health outcomes; countries like Brazil and Israel specifically call out ultra-processed foods in government dietary guidelines.

But in those studies there is not a standard definition for ultra-processed food. Research that uses the same Nova scale often places different foods in different categories.

Industry groups like the National Cattlemen's Beef Association and the International Dairy Foods Association are seizing on the lack of a concrete definition to oppose regulation and potential "misclassification" of nutritionally wholesome foods.

In a joint letter with fellow cereal makers Post and Kellogg, General Mills called it "oversimplified criteria" that ignores processed foods' "safety, convenience, accessibility and affordability."

"Defining the overall healthfulness of a food based on the level of processing discounts the benefits of a food's nutrient density," the letter said.

At a nutrition conference this month, Hess said, "We kind of know it when we see it, but what is it exactly if we're not using a criteria to define it in?"

"While I'm not personally convinced it's a useful construct, I think if we get useful research ... because we're investigating ultra-processed foods, that's a win for public health," she said. "Is there something to ultra-processed foods? I think we'll know, hopefully soon enough."

For now, a federal advisory committee is still pondering the question: "What is the relationship between consumption of dietary patterns with varying amounts of ultra-processed foods and growth, body composition and risk of obesity?"

It will take until the end of the year to finalize dietary guidelines for 2025–2030, which are used by [public health](#) officials, nutritionists and federal programs that provide food assistance and funding for school meals.

Slavin doesn't expect the committee to adopt any recommendations around ultra-processed foods.

"People will be very disappointed by that," she said. "I think they'll say this is a really important issue, but ... we don't want to get it wrong."

In the meantime, various studies are underway that could give more nuance to the connection between processed food and health. Many of them could generate more headlines that keep ultra-processing in the public eye, and food companies on the defensive.

"We need to capitalize on this public awareness and this interest to generate the kinds of data that we actually need to make actionable changes," said Kevin Hall, a National Institutes of Health researcher. "If it turns out, at the end of the day, that this concept adds nothing beyond what we already know what makes up a healthy diet, we need the data to show that."

Even if the dietary guidelines don't end up adopting any language around ultra-processed foods, front-of-package labeling could influence how consumers shop.

Sen. Bernie Sanders told the FDA earlier this year that strong health warnings are needed for foods "loaded up with sugar, salt and saturated fats that are purposely designed to be overeaten."

Harmening said such labeling requirements are becoming more common around the world, and General Mills has "competed with all kinds of regulatory environments."

"It's not the first time we've seen that movie," he said. "The key to having something constructive when labeling products is to make sure it's based on science, not just the politics of the day or what's convenient."

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