

Drone food delivery is spreading across Australia. Research suggests people will eat more junk food as a result

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Last week, a drone delivery company called Wing (owned by Google's parent company, Alphabet) [started operating in Melbourne](#). Some

250,000 residents in parts of the city's eastern suburbs can now order food from cafes and restaurants via the DoorDash app and have it brought to them in minutes by a small aircraft.

This is the first large-scale rollout of autonomous food [delivery](#) in Australia. What does it mean for our food ordering, and our health? Research (including ours) into online food delivery platforms suggests this extra convenience may come at a cost to public health.

Online food delivery is booming—but most of it's unhealthy

In Australia, [more than 7 million people](#) use food delivery services such as DoorDash and UberEats. The typical users are 25–34-year-olds in capital cities.

The online food delivery industry is growing rapidly. In 2023, DoorDash generated [US\\$8.6 billion \(A\\$13.1 billion\) in revenue](#), increasing from US\$885 million (A\$1.4 billion) in 2019.

Research has shown that the food available and promoted through Australian online food delivery platforms is [mostly unhealthy](#), and more unhealthy food is available in [areas of socioeconomic disadvantage](#). Our own research has also shown that unhealthy foods are also [more likely](#) to be promoted with discounts and higher visibility than healthy options on these platforms.

Autonomous delivery promises greener convenience

At the moment, most food delivery is carried out by humans. However, delivery via robots and drones is on the rise.

This is often referred to as "autonomous delivery," but these machines are not truly autonomous. Instead they have [some human supervision](#), much like a "self-driving" car. Wing says it has [up to 50 drones](#) being supervised by a single human pilot.

Autonomous food deliveries are operating in the United States, United Kingdom, and parts of Europe and Asia. Robots loaded with food have traveled along [footpaths in Los Angeles](#) and elsewhere in the US, as well as [the UK, Finland and Estonia](#). Due to the small scale, the potential public health impacts of autonomous delivery are currently not well understood.

Beyond greater convenience, autonomous delivery has been hailed as an [eco-friendly alternative](#) to traditional methods, as a small electric quadcopter produces significantly less carbon emissions than a delivery van. One study found the environmental footprint of drone delivery is roughly [one-sixth that of motorbike delivery](#). One robot manufacturer claims a delivery with one of its devices uses less energy than [boiling a kettle](#).

Australians think they will use drone delivery to eat more junk

Drone deliveries have been operating in Australia on a small scale [since 2017](#). Wing has trialed a handful of locations in [Queensland](#) and [Canberra](#), but has faced resident complaints and bird attacks.

What do people think about drone delivery? Research suggests the Australian public has generally positive attitudes towards the idea.

Australians surveyed in one study believe drones would [allow for lower delivery costs](#) due to replacing human drivers. Another study found

Australians say they would likely use autonomous delivery for [groceries](#), [fast food and alcohol](#).

However, [survey respondents](#) also believed the availability of drone delivery might lead to [more consumption](#) of unhealthy food and alcohol.

Given unhealthy foods saturate online food delivery platforms, the enthusiasm for drone delivery raises serious [public health](#) concerns.

Drone delivery may further concentrate power in the food industry

Online food delivery platforms are primarily operated by large, multinational technology companies. Powerful companies have faced criticism for their [influence over the food system](#), the [marketing of unhealthy food](#), and [treatment of gig economy workers](#).

If drone food delivery becomes widespread, it is likely to further concentrate power in the hands of a few online food delivery companies and the big tech firms operating the drone services. Efforts by large companies to [sway political decision-making](#) in favor of commercial interests are increasing, and growing concentration in the food industry has led to companies [prioritizing profits](#) over the health of their customers.

In Australia, Wing—one of only [two companies](#) licensed to make drone deliveries, with [the other](#) focused on medical supplies—has been an [active contributor](#) to the drafting of new [drone](#) regulations. The [company](#) is also getting in on the ground floor of [drone air traffic management software](#).

As autonomous delivery becomes more common, we may well see

people using it to consume more [unhealthy food](#) and alcohol—unless delivery platforms begin to promote health as well as convenience.

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