

# Ultra-Processed Foods Linked To Brain Changes That Drive Overeating



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*[Authored by George Citroner via The Epoch Times \(emphasis ours\),](#)*

**Ultra-processed foods (UPF) may be literally rewiring your brain to make you overeat**, according to research that examined brain scans from nearly 30,000 middle-aged adults and found structural changes in regions that control hunger and food cravings.



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“We present evidence that eating UPFs increases several nutrient and metabolic markers of disease and is associated with structural brain changes in areas that regulate eating behavior,” the study authors wrote.

## Key Brain Changes Identified

The research, recently published in [Nature](#), found that people who consumed more UPFs showed measurable differences in brain areas involved in feeding behavior, emotion, and motivation.

Higher UPF intake was linked to increased thickness in the bilateral lateral occipital cortex—a brain region crucial for visual object recognition and processing shapes. This finding suggests changes in how the brain processes visual food cues.

**“Our findings indicate that a high consumption of ultra-processed foods is associated with structural changes in brain regions regulating eating behaviour**, such as the hypothalamus, amygdala and right nucleus accumbens. This may lead to a cycle of overeating,” Arsène Kanyamibwa, the study’s first author and doctoral researcher at the University of Helsinki, said in a [press statement](#).

The study also uncovered a potential biological mechanism behind these brain changes. Researchers found that increased UPF intake was associated with higher levels of systemic inflammation and risky metabolic markers in the blood, including C-reactive protein (CRP), an indicator of inflammation; triglycerides; and glycated hemoglobin (HbA1c). High levels of CRP, triglycerides, and HbA1c are often considered concerning indicators of potential health issues.

## Unsurprising Findings, Expert Says

 The findings “don’t surprise me one bit,” said Dr. Joseph Mercola, a board-certified family physician and author of “Your Guide to Cellular Health,” who was not involved in the study.

He pointed to previous [research](#) showing that just five days of eating ultra-processed foods can “short-circuit” insulin signaling in the brain. This matters because insulin isn’t only a blood sugar hormone, he noted. “It’s literally the delivery service that shuttles glucose, your cells’ preferred fuel, to where it’s needed most—your brain.”

**The brain needs insulin for energy—it uses 20 percent of the body’s energy despite making up just 2 percent of its weight—so when insulin can’t do its job, the brain’s appetite control centers run on fumes**, Mercola said.

UPFs are designed to be “[hyper-palatable](#)” with combinations of sugar, fat, and salt that rapidly stimulate dopamine-driven reward pathways, encouraging repeated consumption.

Mercola added that this breakdown wrecks our ability to feel full, curb cravings, and make solid dietary decisions. “On top of that, ultra-processed foods light up dopamine pathways much like addictive drugs, creating powerful ‘eat more’ signals.”

## Direct Brain Effects

The researchers noted that UPFs, which contain chemically modified ingredients and additives like emulsifiers, might change the brain through pathways independent of obesity. Emulsifiers may [affect](#) the brain by disrupting neurotransmitters, causing neuroinflammation, and altering gut microbiota.

The study controlled for factors including nutrient content, socioeconomic status, physical activity, smoking, and alcohol use.

The finding challenges the idea that obesity is just about eating too many calories, Avery Zenker, a registered dietitian at MyHealthTeam and EverFlex Fitness who holds a master’s degree in nutrition and was not involved in the study, told The Epoch Times. The study highlights how additives and food processing affect the brain in a way that promotes overeating.

**“A calorie is a calorie, but the type of food it’s sourced from plays a significant role in how we eat and how much we eat,”** Zenker said. “I think it’s also validating for people to hear that, if they feel out of control around ultra-processed foods, there’s nothing wrong with them.”

Ultra-processed foods are defined by the NOVA classification system as industrial formulations containing ingredients not typically used in home cooking, such as high-fructose corn syrup, oils, salt, stabilizers, antioxidants, and various chemical additives.



## Growing Body of Evidence

The researchers note that their findings, in addition to previous studies, suggest it's time for regulatory action.

One of these studies, involving more than 114,000 American adults and published last year in [The BMJ](#), found UPF consumption—specifically processed meats, sugary breakfast foods, and sugar or artificially sweetened beverages—was linked to a 4 percent higher risk of all-cause mortality and an 8 percent higher risk of death from neurodegenerative diseases.

**“Given the growing body of evidence, reducing ultra-processed food intake and strengthening regulatory standards in food manufacturing may be crucial steps toward ensuring better public health outcomes,”** Kanyamibwa said.

Zenker said the new study is consistent with much of the existing research on ultra-processed foods.

“While past research has consistently linked UPFs to health conditions like obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease,” she said, “This study goes further by exploring direct structural changes in the brain, particularly in regions related to reward, hunger, and self-regulation.”



Zenker noted that UPFs are often high in sugar, sodium, fat, and carbohydrates, and low in vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants. “We know that this combination tends to be associated with unfavorable health outcomes.”

The researchers acknowledged limitations in their study, noting that while they found associations between UPF consumption and brain changes, they cannot definitively prove causation. The effect sizes were also relatively small. 

“Given the observational nature of the study, we cannot exclude the fact that food processing is only part of the equation,” the study authors wrote. Kanyamibwa said that proving causation will require “further longitudinal or experimental evidence.”

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