

Deadly toll from junk food revealed

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Crackdown: The new study called for governments to encourage people to cut down on UPFs and to “create healthy environments using regulatory and fiscal policies”.

Should we treat it like tobacco? New research has revealed unhealthy foods are linked with tens of thousands of excess deaths. Some think it is well past time for drastic action.

What’s happening?

A new study has found that the consumption of ultra-processed food (UPF) increases the risk of an early death. This kind of food is now associated with almost 18,000 deaths a year in England.

The term “UPF” refers to any food that has undergone many stages of processing. More than half of all the calories an average UK citizen eats and drinks now come from these products.

Scientists think the risk comes from **artificial sweeteners**, **additives**, and **colourants**, as well as changes made in the food when it is processed.

Find out more

Unhealthy foods get people addicted in the same way that drugs like **tobacco** do. However, in moderate quantities, we do not usually get addicted. The problem arises only if we eat lots of sugar and fat.

Some research suggests sugar might be more addictive than **cocaine**.

Which is why some think we should start treating UPFs like a drug. When governments realised that smoking was causing cancer and other health problems, they launched a massive campaign against it.

As a result, the number of deaths linked with smoking has fallen every year since.

Should we treat it like tobacco?

Some say

Yes! UPFs are just as addictive and just as deadly as tobacco. The campaign against smoking has been a massive success: we should learn from it.

Others think

No! We all have to eat, so we cannot put restrictions on eating in the same way we can on a recreational activity like smoking.

Six steps to discovery

Some people say

1. Connect

"Every form of addiction is bad, no matter whether the narcotic be alcohol, morphine or idealism."

Carl Gustav Jung (1875 – 1961), Swiss psychoanalyst

What do you think?

How do you feel about this story? - Are you worried about the amount of ultra-processed food you might be eating?

2. Wonder

What questions do you have? - For example: Does the government have a duty to keep us healthy? Are corporations immoral?

3. Investigate

What are the facts? - Pick out one thing we know about this story for certain and one thing we cannot say for sure.

4. Construct

What is your point of view? - You are the health minister in your country. What action do you take on UPFs?

5. Express

What do others believe? - Get into small groups and discuss the following question: "Should the government be able to dictate what we do with our own bodies?"

6. Reflect

What might happen next? - The year is 2040. For the last 15 years the government has been waging a public health campaign against UPFs. Write a newspaper article describing how things have changed as a result.

Glossary

Artificial Sweeteners - Synthetic sweeteners characterised by a strong sweetening flavour without calories, which may be linked to increased risks of obesity, type 2 diabetes, heart disease and even cancer.

Additives - A substance added to something else to change its properties.

Colourants - A substance added to another substance to change its colour.

Tobacco - A substance smoked in cigarettes. It contains nicotine, which is addictive.

Cocaine - An addictive illegal drug.