

CONSUMPTION OF ULTRA-PROCESSED FOOD IS ASSOCIATED WITH DIETARY NUTRIENT PROFILES LINKED WITH OBESITY IN CHILDREN AGED 2 TO 19 YEARS: EVIDENCE FROM 8 COUNTRIES

SUMMARY

Ultra-processed foods (UPFs) are formulations of food substances with little if any whole food, which typically contains added flavours, colours, and other cosmetic additives. They are particularly high in energy density and free sugars, and low in dietary fibre—dietary characteristics of public health concern that are linked to obesity.

In the current study, data from nationally representative dietary surveys conducted between 2004-2014 was used to assess the association between UPF consumption and dietary nutrient profiles associated with obesity of children and adolescents between 2-19 years old.

Across all age groups, UPFs accounted for 18% and 25% of all calories consumed by Brazilian and Colombian children, and between 27% - 44% of calories in Argentinian, Mexican, and Chilean children. For children in non-Latin American countries (Australia, the UK, and the US), 47% to 68% of all calories came from UPF in all age groups. An increase in UPF was associated with increases in energy density and free sugars and decreases in fibre. However, no significant associations with UPF consumption were observed for free sugars in Colombian pre-schoolers or fibre among British pre-school children.

Results have implications for obesity prevention and treatment efforts. They reinforce the importance of promoting the consumption of minimally processed foods and limiting UPFs among children. Behaviour-change counselling for children could incorporate skills to identify UPFs and understand the consequences of their consumption. Mutually reinforcing policies that disincentivise UPF within the food system and the food environment, with particular emphasis on the school food environments, are needed.



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