

1. Mark your confusion.
2. Show evidence of a close reading.
3. Write a 1+ page reflection.

Americans Consume More Than Half of Their Calories from Ultra-Processed Foods: CDC

Children consumed more calories from ultra-processed foods than adults.

Source: Mary Kekatos, ABCNews.com, August 6, 2025

Adults and children in the United States are getting more than 50% of their total calories from ultra-processed foods, according to a new federal report released early Thursday.

Among Americans aged 1 and older, an average of 55% of their total calories came from ultra-processed foods, according to results from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey conducted between August 2021 and August 2023 and run by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Children aged 18 and younger consumed a higher percentage of calories from ultra-processed foods at 61.9% compared to 53% for adults aged 19 and older.

"That's excessive," Julia Zumpano, a registered dietitian at the Cleveland Clinic, who was not involved in the study, told ABC News. "That's concerning. It's way too much. ... We don't have guidelines, because why would we provide guidelines for junk food, but about 10% would be reasonable."

It comes amid Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s crusade to rid American diets of ultra-processed foods. Recently, the White House's Make America Healthy Again Commission, led by Kennedy, released a report blaming ultra-processed foods as one cause of the rise in chronic disease rates, such as obesity, type 2 diabetes mellitus and cardiovascular disease.

The report described ultra-processed foods as "hyperpalatable," containing little to no whole foods and being low in dietary fiber while being high in salt, sweeteners and unhealthy fats.

Examples include most, but not all, chips, candy bars, breakfast cereals, sugar-sweetened beverages and ready-to-eat meals.

"They're high in sugar, high in carbohydrates and high in fat," Zampano said. "When you combine those, the taste is an explosion in your mouth and you think, 'Wow this is good.'" Studies have shown that consumption of ultra-processed foods has been linked to a higher risk of cardiovascular disease and all-cause mortality, the report said.

When breaking children down into smaller age groups, the report found that children between ages 1 and 5 consumed fewer calories from ultra-processed foods than children between ages 6 and 22 and pre-teens and teenagers aged 12 to 18.

Among adults, those aged 19 to 39 consumed the highest percentage of calories from ultra-processed foods at 54.4% compared to adults aged 40 to 59, who consumed 52.6%, and adults aged 60 and older, who consumed 51.7%.

However, there was a silver lining in the report. Data showed that between 2013 and 2014 and August 2021 through August 2023, average calories from ultra-processed foods fell among adults and children.

Average total calories from ultra-processed foods decreased from 55.8% in 2013 through 2014 to 53% from August 2021 to August 2023. For children, it fell from 63.8% to 61.9% over the same period.

"It's good that we see a decline of the percentage of ultra-processed food in both children and adults," Dr. Fang Fang Zhang, a cancer and nutrition epidemiologist and Neely Family Professor at the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University, who was not involved in the study, told ABC News.

"I wish that there could be some analysis to see which [food subgroup consumption] is declining," she continued. "I didn't see that. It might be the sugars and beverages because we have done a lot of work to try to lower the consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages."

To lower the percentage of total calories Americans are getting from ultra-processed foods, Zumpano said she would like to see less marketing of the products on television and make sure schools and parents are educated on the negative health effects of ultra-processed foods.

"If kids get a packaged snack or a dessert at school lunch every day, they think it's okay," she said. "Or if their parents are eating ultra-processed foods every day, then they think it's okay. It has to come from schools, parents educating themselves and then educating their children."

Zhang agreed, saying the reduction of ultra-processed foods in schools and workplaces "could have a long-lasting impact on the overall population level health."

Possible Response Questions:

- What are your thoughts about consuming ultra-processed foods? Explain.
- Did something in the article surprise you? Discuss.
- Pick a word/line/passage from the article and respond to it.
- Discuss a "move" made by the writer in this piece that you think is good/interesting. Explain.