Briefing: Will the cost-of-living crisis decide this election? The hidden force behind the vote: food

Confronting Australia's ultra-processed food problem in a cost-of-living crisis

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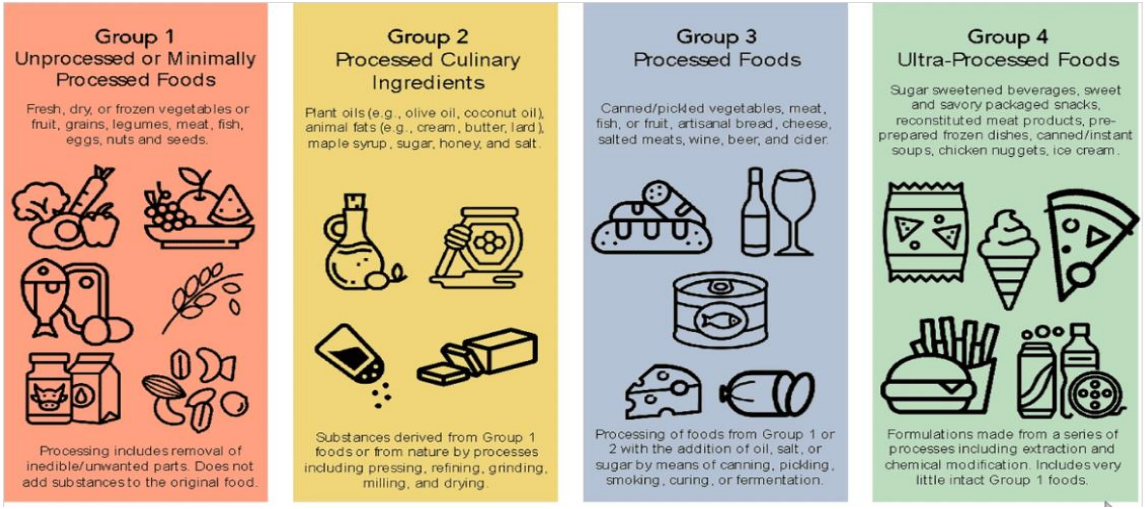
Australia's ultra-processed food problem

Australians are eating more ultra-processed food than ever before

Australia faces a critical issue: an alarming level of ultra-processed food consumption.

Despite producing enough food to feed 60 million people, many Australians find themselves unable to afford healthy food, instead relying heavily on cheaper, harmful ultra-processed options.

These foods disguise high long-term health and economic costs, burdening families and our healthcare system significantly.

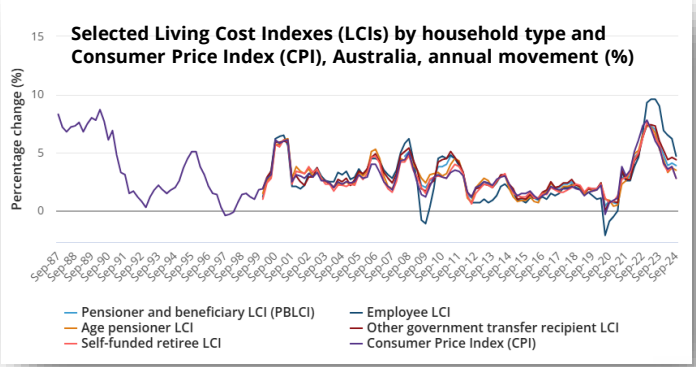


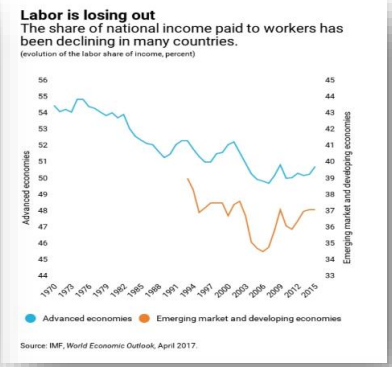
Traditional and long-established dietary patterns

Ultra-processed dietary pattern


AUSTRALIAN
FOOD &
GROCERY
COUNCIL
UNCLE TOBYS OATS
KiX
FROSTED FLAKES
Reese's Puffs
Cinnamon Toast Crunch
Lucky Charms
Cocoa Puffs
Cookie Crisp
Honey Nut Cheerios
APPLE JACKS
Kettle
ROSEMARY & SEA SALT
HONEY SOY CHICKEN
CHILLI
SEA SALT & VINEGAR
Cheetos

Australia's ultra-processed food problem



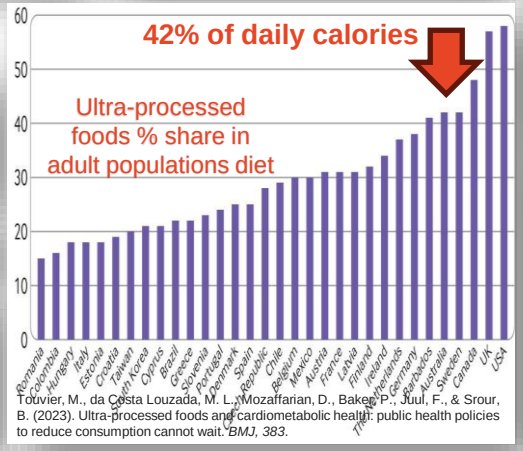


Many Australians are dependent on cheap ultra-processed foods amid the cost of living crisis

Hundreds of Australians say they skip meals, visit food banks and 'dumpster dive' as the cost of living crisis continues

Food insecurity at crisis level for many Australians

Young People Are Struggling to Afford Food in Australia



Louzada, M. L., da Costa Louzada, M. L., Mozaffarian, D., Baker, P., Juul, F., & Srour, B. (2023). Ultra-processed foods and cardiometabolic health: public health policies to reduce consumption cannot wait. *BMJ, 383*.

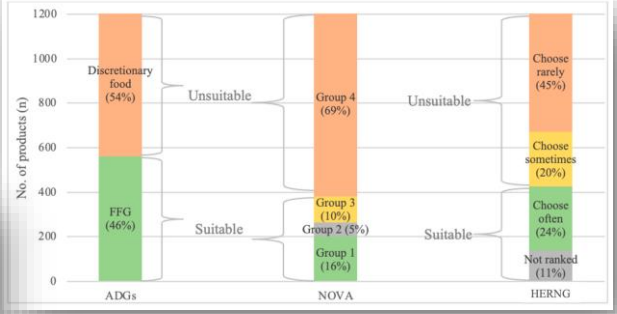
nutrients Of donated food products – 69% ultra-processed

MDPI

Article

The Nutritional Quality of Food Donated to a Western Australian Food Bank

Sharonna Mossenson [1,*], Roslyn Giglia [2], Claire E. Pulker [1,3], Satvinder S. Dhaliwal [1,4,5,6], Miranda Chester [2], Ruby Bigwood [1] and Christina M. Pollard [1,7,8]



Public Health Nutrition: 25(1), 94–104 doi:10.1017/S1368980021003967

Ultra-processed food consumption, socio-demographics and diet quality in Australian adults

Laura Marchese[1,*], Katherine M Livingstone[2], Julie L Woods[2], Kate Wingrove[2] and Priscila Machado[2]

[1]School of Exercise and Nutrition Sciences, Deakin University, 221 Burwood Hwy, Burwood, VIC 3125, Australia; [2]Institute for Physical Activity and Nutrition (IPAN), School of Exercise and Nutrition Sciences, Deakin University, Geelong, VIC, Australia

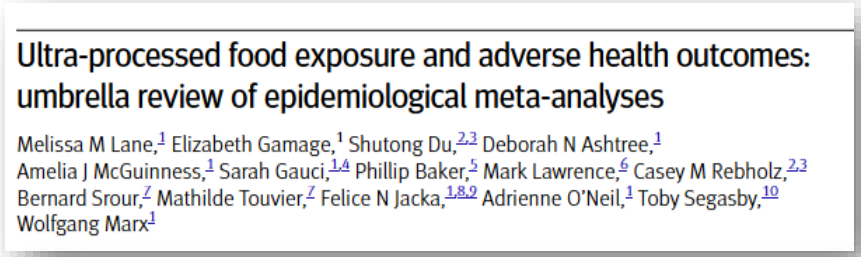
UPF consumption higher among younger adults, those experiencing greatest area-level disadvantage, and lower levels of education

Australia's ultra-processed food problem

Umbrella review of 45 systematic reviews and meta-analyses involving almost 10 million participants

Direct associations found between exposure to ultra-processed foods and **32 poor health outcomes** including cancer, cardiovascular disease, gastrointestinal illnesses, obesity and mental ill-health

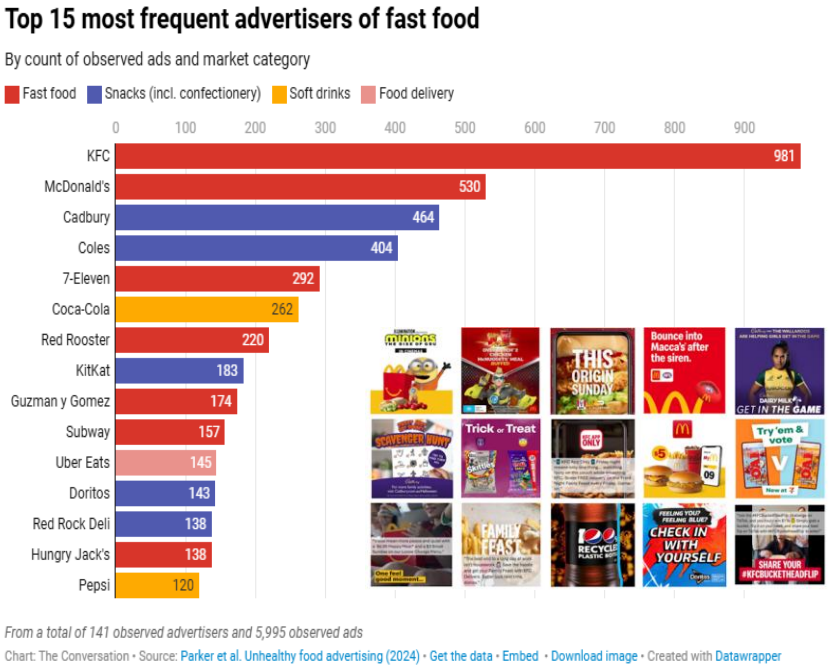
Randomised controlled trials show **people consume 500-800 more calories / day on an ultra-processed diet** compared with a minimally processed one



Australia's ultra-processed food problem

There is no Australian Government regulation to specifically protect children from unhealthy food marketing. Industry has developed self-regulatory codes - but evidence shows these are not working

- The food industry spends $400 million every year on advertising in Australia – the large majority for unhealthy foods
- UPF marketing is ubiquitous, often targets children and teens
- Not just on television, but on social media, games, billboards, shopping centres and supermarkets
- Food companies like KFC and McDonalds are major sponsors of Australian sports, including children's sports teams and clubs
- Parents are swamped: Store audits find 80% of packaged food products marketed for toddlers are sweetened snack foods and 85% ultra-processed



Northcott, Tanita Rose; Sievert, Katherine; Russell, Cherie; Obeid, Abdul Karim; Parker, Christine; Angus, Daniel (2024). Unhealthy food advertising on social media: Policy lessons from the Australian Ad Observatory. The University of Melbourne. Preprint. https://doi.org/10.26188/26089525.v2

Confronting Australia's UPF problem: A proven policy package

Drawing from successes in Mexico, Chile, Brazil, and beyond, Australia urgently needs this comprehensive policy package. Evidence shows these measures work;

- **Fiscal and distributional measures:** Introduce taxes on UPFs; redirect funds to healthier diets; more resources for people and families including extended social protections.
- **Clear front-of-pack warning labels and claims regulation:** Mandatory labelling highlighting unhealthy ingredients; mandate or ditch HSR and adopt warning labels (e.g. Chile); address claims
- **Strict marketing restrictions:** Comprehensive bans on UPF advertising, especially to children and adolescents; covering all forms of media, including digital; adopt WHO Code into national law.
- **Regulate retail environments:** Limit supermarket promotions of UPFs including baby and toddler foods; support local food producers and farmers' markets; tackle the supermarket duopoly.
- **National food strategy & governance:** Establish a dedicated food and nutrition ministerial portfolio and implement a cohesive national strategy and food councils; without corporate interference.
- **National school food programme and procurement:** Provide school kids with two healthy meals / day sourced from local producers; healthy procurement for schools, hospitals and other public institutions.
- **Independent monitoring & transparency:** Regular evaluations by a National Food and Nutrition Observatory, making data easily accessible and clearly reported.

Thank you

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