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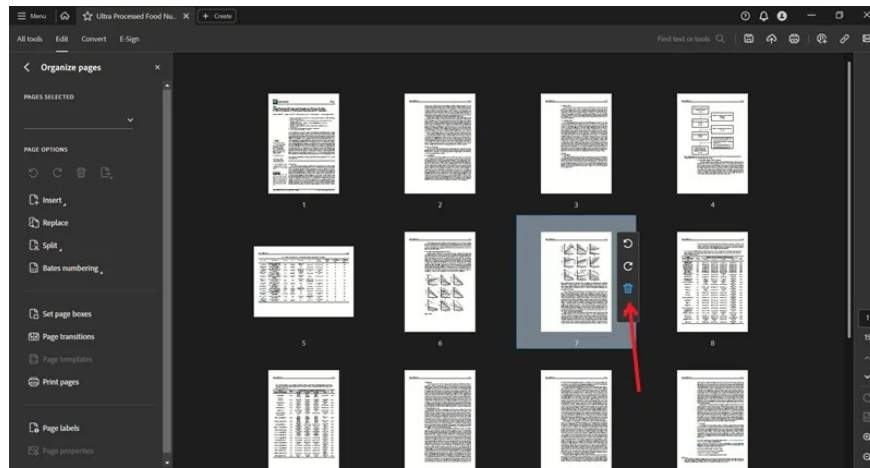
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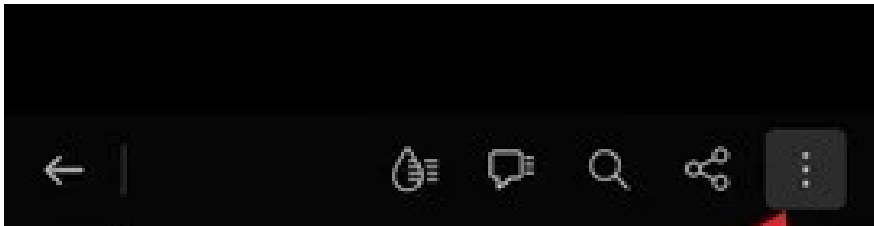
















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# Review Ultra-Processed Foods and Nutritional Dietary Profile: A Meta-Analysis of Nationally Representative Samples

Beatriz Martin <sup>1,†</sup>, Jaume Grau <sup>1,†</sup>, Marianne Beunckes <sup>2</sup>, Felix Yinghai <sup>3</sup> and Giuseppe Casari <sup>4,5</sup>

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**Abstract:** Excessive consumption of ultra-processed foods (UPFs) as described by the NOVA classification system, represents a potential threat to human health. The nutritional composition of UPFs may explain their adverse effects. The present study aims to provide a quantitative meta-analysis of nationally representative surveys on the consumption of UPFs and the dietary nutrient composition of respondents' diets. A systematic search for relevant studies published prior to July 2020 was conducted in a systematic database. The studies that provided the dietary nutrient composition of meals consumed according to the NOVA classification system were selected. The association between UPFs and other dietary variables was identified using random-effect regression models based on aggregated data obtained from the selected studies. A consumption of UPFs represented up to 40% of total energy intake in the US and Canada, with individuals and ages reported being the most consumed items. When considered in relation to other food groups, an inverse linear relation between UPFs and less processed foods was evident. Increased UPF intake correlated with an increase in total energy, total fat, and saturated fat, as well as a decrease in fiber, protein, iron, and potassium, and lower vitamin E, B1, B6, and zinc. In conclusion, the data indicate that increased UPF consumption negatively affects the nutritional quality of diets.

**Keywords:** ultra-processed food; dietary intake; nutritional beverages; snacks; nutrients; nutrition; UPF; quantitative

**Citation:** Martin, B.; Grau, J.; Beunckes, M.; Yinghai, F.; Casari, G. Ultra-Processed Foods and Nutritional Dietary Profile: A Meta-Analysis of Nationally Representative Samples. *Nutrients* **2021**, *13*, 1000. <https://doi.org/10.3390/13071000>

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Europe, and elsewhere than in other regions, however substantial growth in Latin America, Eastern Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, and Central and Eastern Asia was noted and is projected to continue over the coming years [1]. The rise in consumption of UPFs is associated with several aspects of western lifestyles, including longer working hours, increased working hours, reduced time for food, and the need to gain and maintain affordability of UPFs [2]. Moreover, UPF supply across the globe when an attempt is developing markets or industrialized markets (or developed ones), with their availability increasing with the accessibility of infrastructure and fast food chains [3].

Most studies on UPFs in relation to human health report a significant association with an increased risk of obesity [4–6], however, recent data corroborated that the potential health risks associated with their consumption may also include a higher risk of adverse cardiovascular outcomes including cardiovascular diseases, hypertension, and metabolic syndrome [7]. Depression, oxidative stress, metabolic syndrome, and eating habits, and overall mortality [8–10]. In addition to products containing additives and preservatives, UPFs as classified by the NOVA system, may also include energy-dense products and those high in added sugars, fats, or sodium, which may explain, from a mechanistic point of view, their observed deleterious effects on human health [11]. Moreover, increased consumption of ultra-processed foods or UPFs, in terms of total amount or as a percent of total energy intake, is readily sufficient to exert such negative effects [12].

The vast majority of studies that assess UPF consumption at the national level are cross-sectional and rely on self-reported consumption and combined evaluation of individual's reporting UPF intake and their nutritional quality in foods. Thus, it is important to understand how the consumption of UPFs correlates with the overall nutritional intake and quality of diets. In this study, we aimed to systematically review the available data from nationally representative surveys regarding UPF consumption in relation to dietary nutritional profiles, and to perform a meta-analysis of the results in order to understand the association on discrepancies that exist between regions.

**2. Materials and Methods**

We followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) guidelines—an evidence-based minimum set of items for reporting in systematic reviews and meta-analyses—when generating information regarding the work conducted in this study (Supplementary Table S1).

**Study Selection**

Identification of all articles published up to July 2020 was conducted via a systematic search in MEDLINE and EMBASE. The search strategy was based on the combination of the following key terms: “ultra-processed foods”, “nutrients”, “nutritional profile”, “diet”, and their synonyms. The abstracts cited in each of the selected articles selected for

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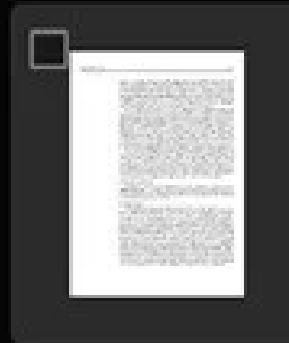
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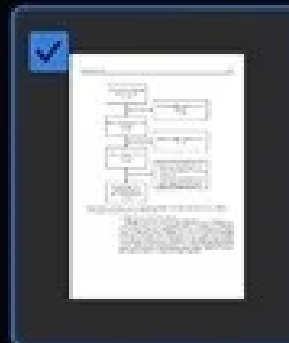
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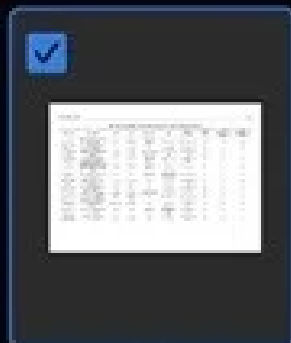
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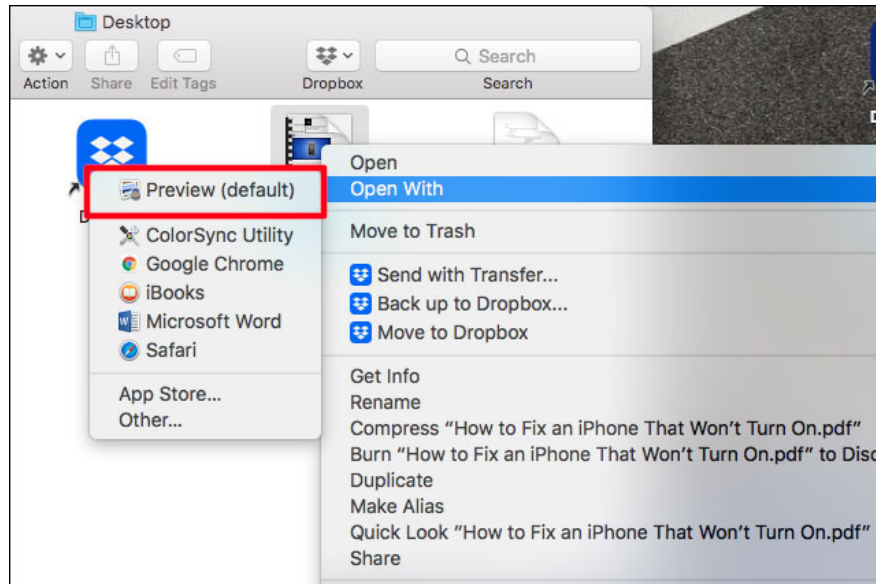
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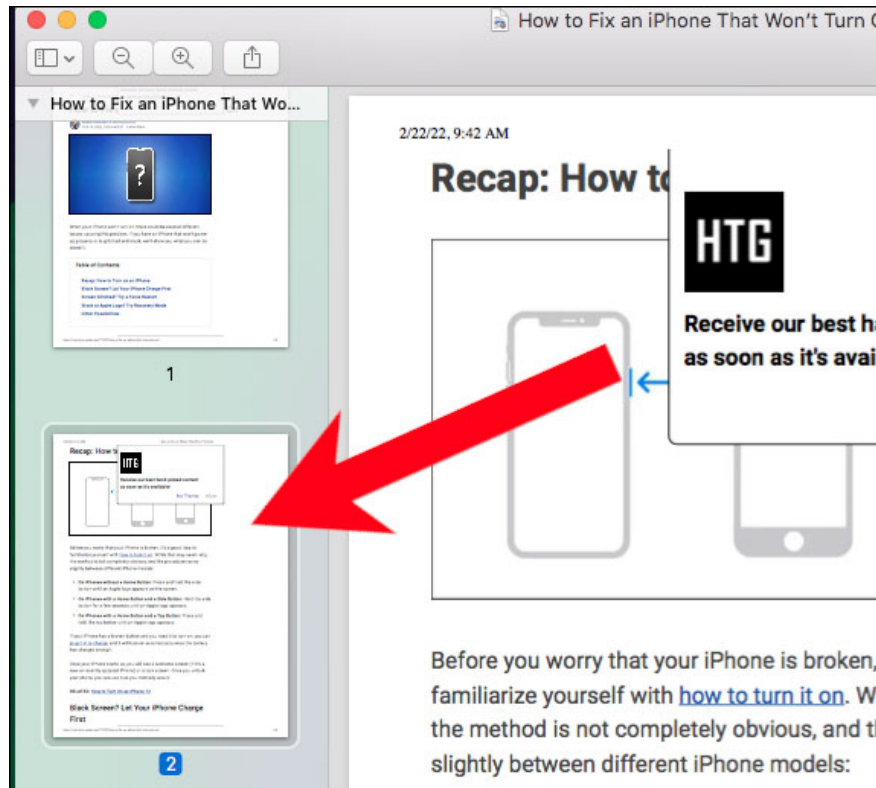
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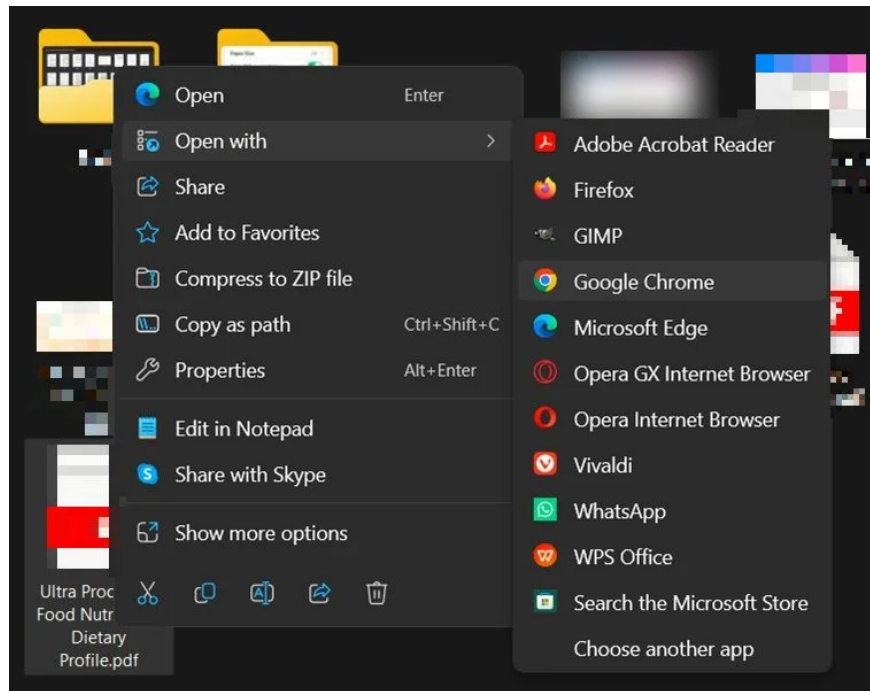
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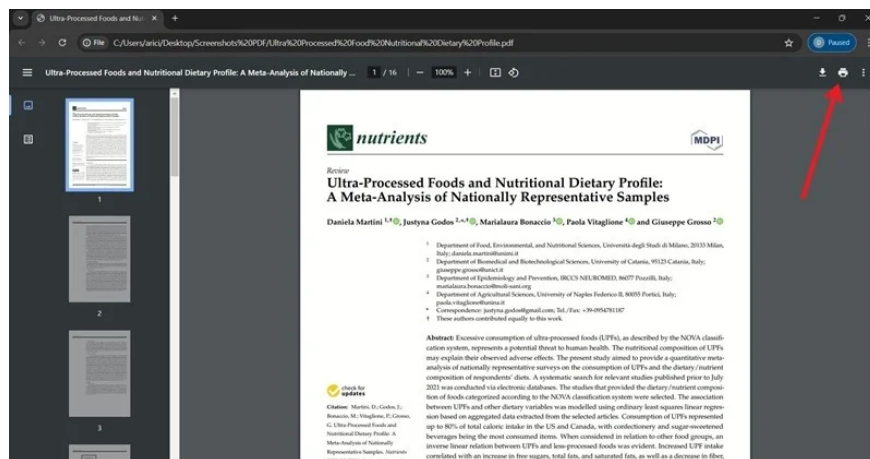
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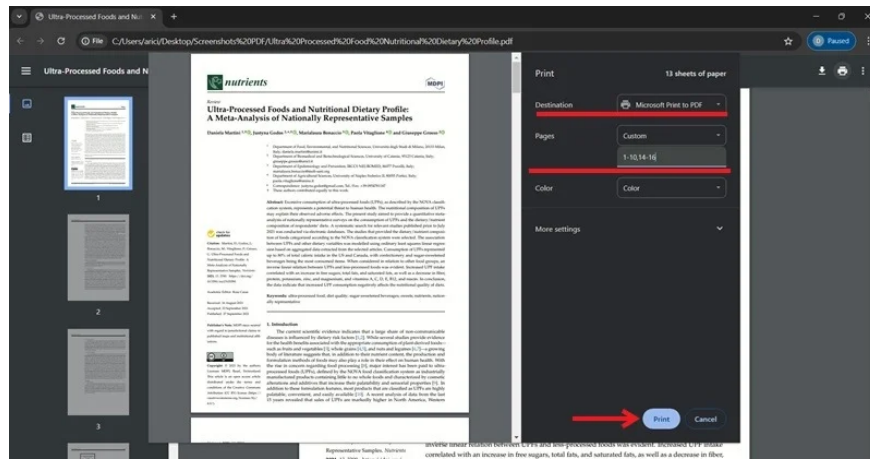
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# Ultra Processed

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## Ultra-Processed Foods and Nutrients: A Meta-Analysis of Nationally Representative Surveys

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- <sup>5</sup> Correspondence: juliana.cadea@ufmg.br
- <sup>6</sup> These authors contributed equally to this work.

**Abstract:** Excessive consumption of ultra-processed foods (UPFs), as described by the NOVA classification system, represents a potential threat to human health. The nutritional composition of UPFs may explain their observed adverse effects. The present study aimed to provide a quantitative meta-analysis of nationally representative surveys on the consumption of UPFs and the dietary (nutrient composition and food intake) data. A systematic search for relevant studies published prior to July 2020 was conducted via electronic databases. The studies that provided the dietary/nutrient composition of food categorized according to the NOVA classification system were selected. The association between UPFs and other dietary variables was modelled using ordinary least squares linear regression based on aggregated data extracted from the selected articles. Consumption of UPFs represented up to 40% of total caloric intake in the US and Canada, with consistently high sugar-sweetened beverages being the most consumed items. When considered in relation to other food groups, an inverse linear relation between UPFs and less processed foods was evident. Increased UPF intake correlated with an increase in free sugars, total fats, and saturated fats, as well as a decrease in fiber, potassium, zinc, and magnesium, and vitamins A, C, D, E, K12 and niacin. In conclusion, the data indicate that increased UPF consumption negatively affects the nutritional quality of diets.

**Keywords:** ultra-processed food, diet quality, sugar-sweetened beverages, obesity, nutrients, nationally representative

**Introduction**

Global health is facing a new paradigm, with rapid increases in non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as cardiovascular diseases, cancer, and diabetes [1]. The rise in NCDs is associated with the inappropriate consumption of ultra-processed foods (UPFs), such as refined grains [2], red and processed meats [3], and sugary drinks [4]. A growing body of literature suggests that, in addition to their nutrient content, the production and formulation methods of foods may also play a role in their effect on human health. With the rise in concern regarding food processing [5], major interest has been paid to ultra-processed foods (UPFs), defined by the NOVA food classification system as industrially manufactured products containing little to no whole foods and characterized by cosmetic alterations and additives that increase their palatability and sensorial properties [6]. In addition to these manipulation features, most products that are classified as UPFs are highly palatable, convenient, and easily available [10]. A recent analysis of data from the last 15 years revealed that sales of UPFs are markedly higher in North America, Western

**1. Introduction**

The current scientific evidence indicates that a large share of non-communicable diseases is influenced by dietary risk factors [1,2]. While several studies provide evidence for the health benefits associated with the appropriate consumption of plant-derived foods—such as fruits and vegetables [3], whole grains [4,5], and nuts and legumes [6,7]—a growing body of literature suggests that, in addition to their nutrient content, the production and formulation methods of foods may also play a role in their effect on human health. With the rise in concern regarding food processing [8], major interest has been paid to ultra-processed foods (UPFs), defined by the NOVA food classification system as industrially manufactured products containing little to no whole foods and characterized by cosmetic alterations and additives that increase their palatability and sensorial properties [9]. In addition to these manipulation features, most products that are classified as UPFs are highly palatable, convenient, and easily available [10]. A recent analysis of data from the last 15 years revealed that sales of UPFs are markedly higher in North America, Western

Europe, and Australia than in other regions; however, substantial growth in Latin America, Eastern Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, and Central and Eastern Asia was noted and is projected to continue over the coming years [11]. The rise in consumption of UPFs is associated with several aspects of modern lifestyles, including longer eating windows, frequent snacking, eating outside the home, and the ease of access and economic affordability of UPFs [12]. Moreover, UPF supply across the globe relies on emerging (in developing countries) or consolidated markets (in developed ones), with their availability increasing with the accessibility of supermarkets and fast-food chains [13].

Most studies on UPFs in relation to human health report a substantial association with an increased risk of obesity [14]; however, recent evidence underlined that the health risks associated with their consumption may also include a higher risk of cardio-metabolic outcomes (including cardiovascular diseases, hypertension, and syndrome X) [15], depression, irritable bowel syndrome, all-cause and cardiovascular mortality, and overall mortality [16,17]. In addition to products containing ultra-processed ingredients, UPFs—as classified by the NOVA system—may also include other products and those high in added sugars, fats, or sodium, which may explain, from a mechanistic point of view, their observed detrimental effects on human health [18]. Moreover, several studies have shown that diets high in UPFs are often associated with a greater total energy intake, as well as increased body weight and adiposity [19].

The majority of studies that assess UPF consumption and the associated health outcomes are conducted based on self-reported intake, which may lead to a biased evaluation of individuals' diets regarding UPF intake and diet nutritional quality. Thus, it is important to understand how the consumption of UPFs correlates with the amount



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## Review Ultra-Processed Foods and Nutritional Dietary Profile: A Meta-Analysis of Nationally Representative Samples

Estelita Martínez <sup>1,2,3</sup>, Justyna Górska <sup>2,3</sup>, Marielena Rosendo <sup>2,3</sup>, Paula Wąsłowska <sup>2,3</sup> and George Corcos <sup>2,3</sup>

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**Abstract:** Excessive consumption of ultra-processed foods (UPFs), as described by the NOVA classification system, represents a potential threat to human health. The nutritional composition of UPFs may explain their observed dietary effects. The present study aimed to provide a quantitative meta-analysis of nationally representative surveys on the consumption of UPFs and the dietary nutrient composition of respondents' diets. It systematically searched relevant studies published prior to July 2021 via electronic databases. The studies that provided the dietary nutrient composition of foods categorized according to the NOVA classification system were selected. The association between UPFs and other dietary variables was analyzed using ordinary least squares linear regression based on aggregated data extracted from the selected articles. Consumption of UPFs represented up to 30% of total energy intake in the US and Canada, with carbohydrates and sugar-sweetened beverages being the most consumed items. When considered in relation to other food groups, an inverse linear relation between UPF and fiber, potassium, iron, zinc, and calcium, as well as a decrease in fiber, protein, potassium, iron, and magnesium, and vitamins A, C, D, E, K, and folate, was observed. The data indicate that increased UPF consumption negatively affects the nutritional quality of diets.

**Keywords:** ultra-processed food; diet quality; sugar-sweetened beverages; obesity; nutrients; nutritionally representative



**Citation:** Martínez, E.; Górska, J.; Rosendo, M.; Wąsłowska, P.; Corcos, G. Ultra-Processed Foods and Nutritional Dietary Profile: A Meta-Analysis of Nationally Representative Samples. *Nutrients* **2022**, *14*, 1002. <https://doi.org/10.3390/nu14071002>

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### 1. Introduction

The current scientific evidence indicates that a large share of non-communicable diseases is influenced by dietary risk factors [1,2]. While several studies provide evidence for the health benefits associated with the appropriate consumption of plant-derived foods—such as fruits and vegetables [3], whole grains [4,5], and nuts and legumes [6,7]—a growing body of literature suggests that, in addition to their nutrient content, the production and formulation methods of foods may also play a role in their effect on human health. With the rise in concerns regarding food processing [8], major interest has been paid to ultra-processed foods (UPFs), defined by the NOVA food-classification system as industrially manufactured products containing little to no whole foods and characterized by excessive additives and additives that increase their palatability and economic properties [9]. In addition to their formulation features, most products that are classified as UPFs are highly palatable, convenient, and easily available [10]. A recent analysis of data from the last 25 years revealed that sales of UPFs are markedly higher in North America, Western



Europe, and Australia than in other regions; however, substantial growth in Latin America, Eastern Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, and Central and Eastern Asia was noted and is projected to continue over the coming years [11]. The rise in consumption of UPFs is associated with several aspects of modern lifestyles, including longer working windows, frequent working, eating outside-the-home, and the ease of access and economic availability of UPFs [12]. Moreover, UPF supply across the globe varies in contrast to developing countries or transitional markets (in developed ones), with their availability increasing with the accessibility of supermarkets and fast-food chains [13].

Most studies on UPFs in relation to human health report a substantial association with an increased risk of obesity [14], however, more evidence underlines that the potential health risks associated with their consumption may also include a higher risk of adverse cardiovascular outcomes including cardiovascular disease, hypertension, and metabolic syndrome [15], depression, irritability, food neophobia, adolescent eating and eating habits, and sexual maturity [16,17]. In addition to products containing additives and preservatives, UPFs (as classified by the NOVA system) may also include energy-dense products and those high in added sugars, fats, or sodium, which may explain, from a mechanistic point of view, their observed detrimental effects on human health [18]. However, increased consumption of vegetables, fruits, and UPFs, in terms of total percent of

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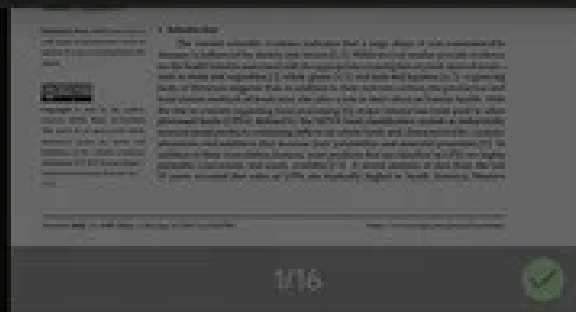
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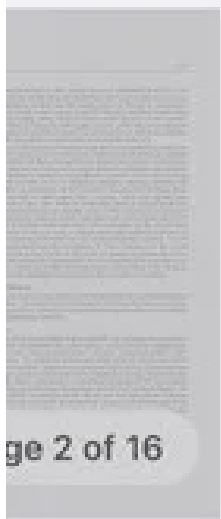
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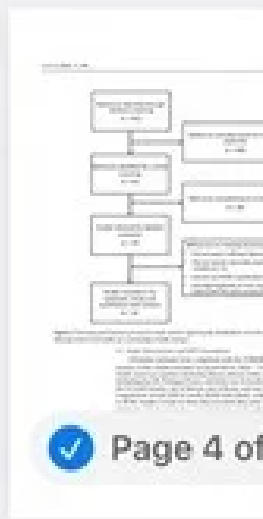
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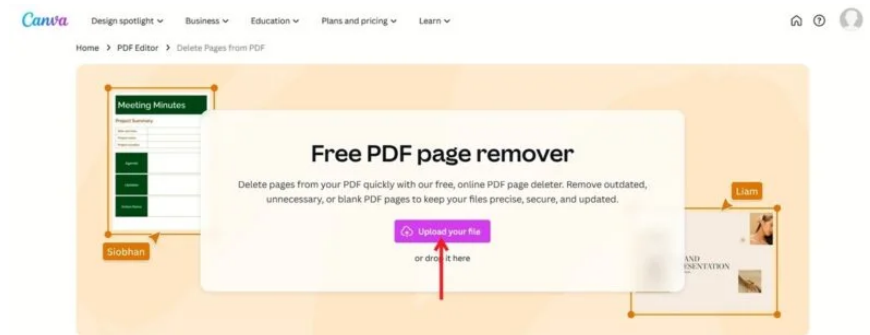
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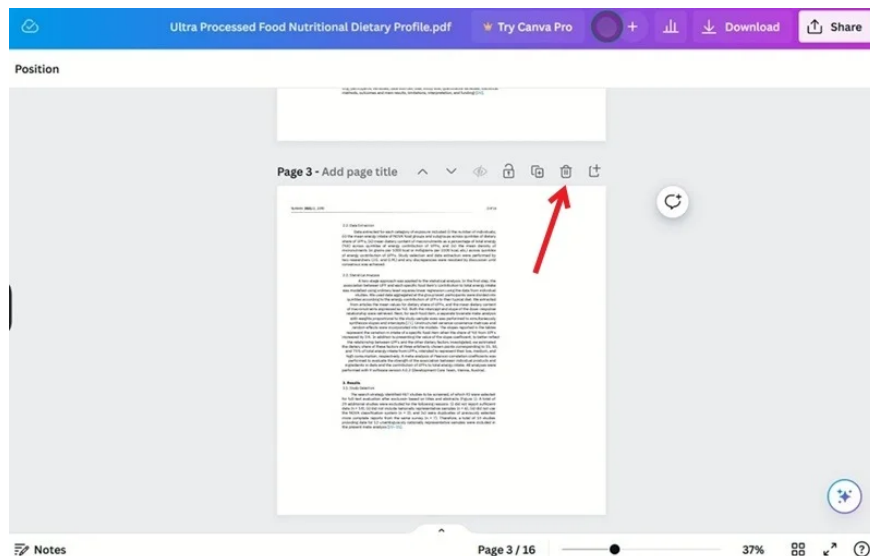
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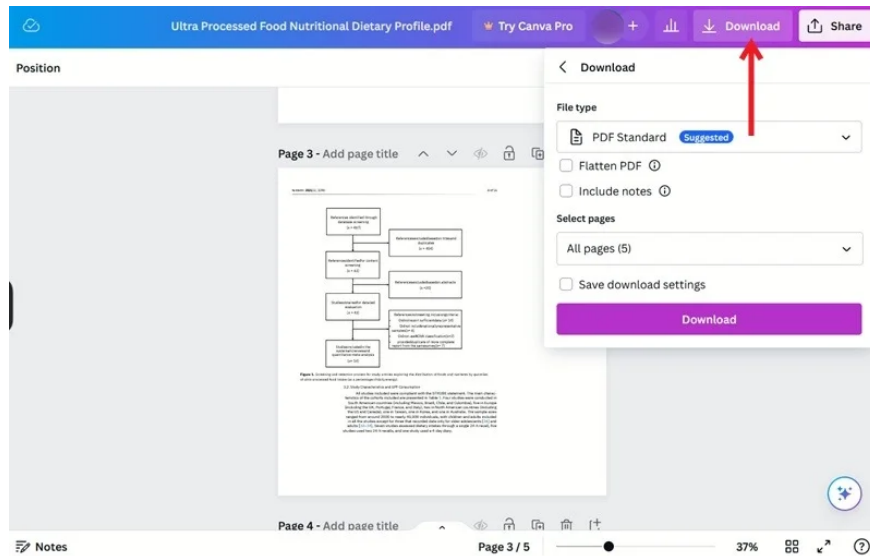
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### Ultra-Processed Foods and Nutritional Dietary Profile: A Meta-Analysis of Nationally Representative Samples

Soledad Marañón <sup>1,†</sup>, Susana Gómez <sup>1,†</sup>, Mercedes Benavente <sup>2,†</sup>, Paula Vázquez <sup>3,†</sup> and Giuseppe Grosso <sup>2,†</sup>

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- \* Correspondence: soledad.maranon@unileon.es; Tel: +34 985410000
- † These authors contributed equally to this work.

**Abstract:** Excessive and inappropriate consumption of ultra-processed foods (UPFs), as described by the NOVA classification system, represents a potential threat to human health. The nutritional composition

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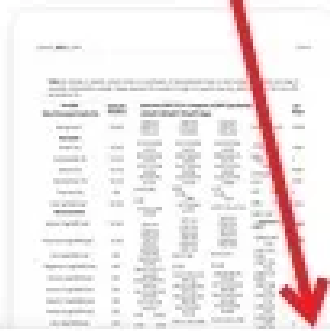
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