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Commentary

The Urgent Need for Action on Ultra-Processed Foods to Combat Cancer and Other Diseases

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Commentary Overview

- Ultra-processed foods are a major driver of chronic inflammation, cancer, and other diseases.
- The Food and Drug Administration is seeking input on how to define ultra-processed foods, and the Make America Healthy Again Caucus aims to connect lawmakers with scientists to discuss research-based opportunities for improving public health.
- Clear labeling on food products and in restaurants, and better education for both the general public and health care providers, would help consumers make informed decisions.
- Creating a healthy food system is a bipartisan issue affecting all Americans, regardless of political affiliation, geography, or income.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA)'s recent request for public input on how to define ultra-processed foods marks a pivotal moment in addressing the link between diet and chronic disease. For the first time, the agency is seeking to shape a regulatory definition with potential nationwide implications for labeling, consumer education, and food policy. Additionally, the Make America Healthy Again (MAHA) Caucus **recently** convened the first in a planned series of briefings designed to connect lawmakers with scientists and experts to discuss research-based opportunities for improving public health. These sessions underscored a shared commitment to explore how diet, prevention, and evidence-based policy can reduce the nation's chronic disease burden. The FDA's new effort to define ultra-processed foods aligns directly with that momentum, creating an opportunity for researchers and policymakers to work together. This is a bipartisan issue affecting all Americans, regardless of

political affiliation, geography, or income.

As a researcher and physician, we fully support these initiatives, but we must go further. It's time to overhaul our dietary guidelines and food labeling and rethink the policies that allow harmful processed products to dominate the marketplace.

Ultra-processed foods rich in seed oils, preservatives, dyes, added sugars, and low-quality carbohydrates, such as fast foods, packaged snacks, and frozen meals, are everywhere in American diets. They offer convenience and affordability, often making them the default in rural and urban “food deserts.” But the hidden cost to our health system is enormous.

Colorectal Cancer Link

A 2024 study [published in Gut](#) by Dr. Yeatman and his team offers a “smoking gun” linking colorectal cancer (CRC) and chronic inflammation to omega-6 fatty acids derived from diet. Western diets often contain omega-6 to omega-3 ratios of 25:1, well beyond healthy levels. While omega-6 fatty acids are essential, excess intake fuels inflammation, immune suppression, and conditions that allow cancer and other diseases to thrive. A [UK Biobank study](#) of 85,000 people over 12 years confirmed that an imbalanced omega-6 to omega-3 ratio is linked to all-cause mortality.

CRC is the second-leading cause of cancer deaths in the U.S., with [over 52,000](#) projected deaths in 2025. Its rise among young adults over the past three decades parallels the explosion of ultra-processed foods. These products, low in fiber, high in added fats and sugars, promote inflammation and oxidative stress, key drivers of cancer development. The risk is tangible and measurable.

Parents face constant challenges in making healthy choices for their families, with unhealthy options deliberately marketed at eye level for children. Labels are often misleading; “low-fat” and “sugar-free” claims can mask high levels of other harmful ingredients. Many additives, such as emulsifiers, preservatives, and artificial sweeteners, disrupt the gut microbiome, a key [regulator](#) of immunity, cardiovascular health, and even brain function. Yet these microbiome impacts are rarely considered in FDA safety assessments.

Clear Labeling, Better Education

One clear solution is adopting a “traffic light” labeling system, already in use in the United Kingdom. This simple color-coded approach, green for healthy, yellow for moderate, red for unhealthy, helps consumers make informed decisions. [In Chile](#), similar labels led to dramatic reductions in purchases of high-sugar, high-fat, and high-sodium products, including a 23.8% drop in calories, 36.7% in sodium, and 26.7% in sugar. In the U.S., this should extend to restaurants, which often rely on seed oils, sugar, and salt, offering “educational menus” beyond calorie counts.

The outdated U.S. food pyramid, shaped more by commercial interests than science, is inadequate for today's health challenges. A new evidence-based model should prioritize whole, minimally processed foods, including fruits, vegetables, legumes, lean proteins, whole grains, and balanced fats, while placing ultra-processed foods at the very top, to be consumed rarely. This approach should guide school lunches, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, and other public nutrition programs.

We must also train physicians, dietitians, and primary caregivers to prioritize prevention over treatment. Unfortunately, without changes in Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) reimbursement that reward preventive care, there's little incentive for doctors, especially early in their careers, to shift to a wellness-based model. Considering that CMS is the second-largest portion of the U.S. budget, investing in prevention makes fiscal as well as moral sense.

A Bipartisan Issue

The evidence is clear: ultra-processed foods are a major driver of chronic inflammation, cancer, and other diseases. With the FDA now opening the door to a national definition, and with growing interest on Capitol Hill, including recent briefings by the MAHA Caucus to bring scientific expertise directly to lawmakers, we have a unique opportunity to push for meaningful reforms in labeling, dietary guidelines, and public health education.

We urge policymakers, health advocates, and consumers to engage in this conversation.

Together, we can create a food system that promotes transparency, empowers healthier choices, and reduces the burden of preventable disease for future generations.

Our Mission

The Association of American Cancer Institutes (AACI) represents over 100 premier academic and freestanding cancer centers in the United States and Canada. AACI is accelerating progress against cancer by enhancing the impact of academic cancer centers and promoting cancer health equity.

About AACI Commentary

To promote the work of its members, AACI publishes *Commentary*, a monthly editorial series focusing on major issues of common interest to North American cancer centers, authored by cancer center leaders and subject matter experts.

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