

Solving the ultra processed food puzzle

For some time now the hunt has been on for the reason the stuff that is called 'ultra processed food' (UPF) doesn't appear to be nutritious. In fact it appears quite bad for us and apart from other problems, is contributing significantly to the obesity epidemic.

UPFs are ubiquitous and form a large part of some people's diets, unfortunately most likely those who are less well off and already at risk of health problems. They are often quick to prepare, easy and cheap. Needless to say as they are industrially designed to appeal, they are delicious. Previous studies have shown it wasn't the fat, the salt, the sugar, the lack of fibre or anything in particular that was causing the problems. Researchers just couldn't isolate the factor or factors that *were* causing them. ***Turns out it could be an open systems problem!***

Nutritional psychiatry is a new specialty dealing with the role of diet in brain and mental health. It has shown for example that the brains of those who indulge in UPF have a smaller hippocampus and reduced cognitive functioning. They have also shown connections between mothers eating UPFs and neurodevelopmental disorders in their children (Bains, 2023).

The most recent studies suggest that when nutrients such as vitamins, minerals or proteins are added to UPFs to bring them up to nutritional scratch, the body does not recognize them. It does not, therefore, process them as it would when they are present in whole foods. Therefore, UPF for all its credentials as containing all the components necessary for nutritious food, is leaving us essentially hungry so the body tells us to eat more. So even when we are overweight, we may be malnourished.

It looks as if our brains only recognize these components when they are in their correct, normal ***context***, as part of real natural food. When they are isolated and re-entered into a new chemical mixture, we ignore them with all the consequences we see in epidemiological studies of nutritional deficit.

The researchers say more studies are required to confirm these findings but they are more than a little suggestive and can solve what is now a long standing and urgent problem. Could be that industrialized food is a failure.

Bains, Callum. (2023). Interview with nutritional psychiatrist Felice Jacka: the global food system is the leading cause of early death. *The Guardian*. Sunday 22 October. <https://www.theguardian.com>