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HEALTH

MAJOR STUDY SHOWS HOW ULTRA-PROCESSED FOODS CHANGE YOUR LIFESPAN, IF YOU'RE NOT EATING YOUR VEG

While ultra-processed food is bad for your health, a decades-long study suggests it may not be as harmful as previously thought

Everywhere you look, there are either constant warnings about the health risks associated with eating too many ultra-processed foods (UPFs), or constant temptations to eat them anyway. But while condemned by those promoting a healthy lifestyle, UPFs may be less important to your lifespan than the quality of your diet overall, according to a Harvard University study three decades in the making.

Published in the *British Medical Journal*, the research claims that consuming a large amount of UPF is linked to a four-per-cent higher risk of death from all causes. UPFs often include additives like colouring and flavours, and are typically high in energy, sugar, fat and salt, without the benefits of vitamins or fibre. Certain foods can negatively impact your health more than others, with the worst being ready-to-eat meat,

poultry and seafood products, along with fizzy drinks, dairy-based desserts and highly processed breakfast foods such as sugary cereals.

Over 34 years, researchers tracked the health of nearly 75,000 women and nearly 40,000 men in the US. Every two years these people reported on their health; and every four years they completed a detailed diet questionnaire.

The research team split the participants into quarters depending on their consumption of UPFs: the lowest quarter consumed about three UPF servings per day while the highest quarter ate seven UPFs per day. They discovered that those in the top quarter had a four-per-cent

higher risk of all deaths. There was also a nine-per-cent higher risk of death by specific causes, such as neurodegenerative diseases like dementia.

Crucially, the study found that the link between UPF consumption and death was weakened when they factored in overall diet. This means a higher quality of diet (for example, one containing lots of vegetables, fruits, legumes and wholegrain items) may be more important than the quantity of UPFs you eat.

The researchers say that you don't need to restrict all UPFs, just those that most affect your long-term health.

"It might not be as simple as those who ate more ultra-processed foods were more likely to die earlier," says dietitian Dr Duane Mellor, who wasn't involved in the study. "It's quite possible that these foods might displace healthier foods from the diet."

