- Convenience foods

Why junk food is heart risk

New study highlights danger link

Geelong Advertiser · 17 Oct 2025 · 18 · Maddie Brake Find out more about the Food & Mood Centre: foodandmood-centre.com.au

Most of us know that junk food isn't great for our health. But growing scientific evidence suggests that ultra-processed foods (UPFs) may be doing more harm than we realise, especially to our hearts.



A recent study led by researchers at Deakin University's Food & Mood Centre, part of the Institute for Mental and Physical Health and Clinical Translation, explored the connection between UPFs and Australians' cardiovascular health.

"We believe this is the first study to investigate whether eating UPFs is linked to heartrelated deaths in the Australian population," said research fellow Dr Sarah Gauci.

UPFs are foods that have undergone heavy industrial processing and often contain added sugars, unhealthy fats, preservatives and artificial ingredients. They're designed to be convenient and tasty, but not necessarily nutritious.

Common examples include sugary soft drinks, packaged snacks like chips and biscuits, instant noodles and processed meats like sausages and deli slices.

These foods are typically low in beneficial nutrients and stripped of natural compounds that support health.

The research team analysed data from nearly 40,000 Australian adults over 25 years, taking into account factors such as age, social demographic, lifestyle and existing health conditions.

"We found that people eating and drinking higher amounts of UPFs had a 19 per cent higher risk of dying from cardiovascular disease.

"This increased risk remained even after adjusting for overall diet quality and specific nutrients such as like sugar, sodium and saturated fat. This suggests that the problem isn't just the ingredients, but how these foods are made.

“We know that UPFs lack important nutrients and bioactive compounds – like polyphenols, usually found in fruits, vegetables, tea, coffee and dark chocolate. This compound specifically helps reduce inflammation and protect your heart,” Dr Gauci said.

Beyond poor nutrition,

UPFs may disrupt blood sugar and insulin regulation, interfere with hunger and fullness signals, and negatively affect gut health.

Additives like emulsifiers and artificial sweeteners may alter the gut microbiome, the bacteria in our digestive system, leading to inflammation and increased risk of heart disease.

“Our findings demonstrate that UPFs may be contributing to the growing burden of cardiovascular disease.

“We hope this research will help shape health policies and dietary advice that support Australians in reducing how often they eat UPFs, but more importantly, to have access to affordable, whole foods that promote heart health,” Dr Gauci said.

The Food & Mood Centre is committed to understanding how diet can significantly impact mental health.

Their diverse team of experts is dedicated to uncovering which dietary factors influence brain function and overall wellbeing.

They aim to translate their groundbreaking research into practical solutions that can improve mental health for everyone.