

- Convenience foods

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COMMENT

THE BATTLE OVER WHETHER SLICED BREAD REALLY IS THE BEST THING

Eating too many ultra-processed foods is bad for our health. But is the supermarket sliced loaf being unfairly maligned?

The public discourse around diet and nutrition is polarised and heated, even at the best of times. Yet the reaction I got when I inadvertently found myself at the centre of a debate about supermarket bread took me by surprise.

It all kicked off after I wrote an opinion piece on ultra-processed foods (UPFs) for *The Guardian*. For clarity's sake, we're not talking about processed food, which, aside from fruit plucked straight from a tree, is almost everything we eat today. UPFs are the product of industrial processes that are difficult, if not impossible, to replicate in a domestic kitchen. These include sweetened drinks, pre-packaged sweet and savoury foods, fresh and frozen ready meals, and most supermarket breads.

In the UK, we get around 50 per cent of our calories from UPFs, on average. So, what is it about UPFs that apparently makes them so bad for us?

First, because of the degree of processing, most UPFs are lower in protein and/or fibre. This makes them

“The ubiquity of ultra-processed foods in our food system does require sober debate”



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calorically available, meaning they're easily digestible and our bodies can extract a large proportion of the calories. Second, the processing strips out much of the flavour in the form of the holy trinity: sugar, salt and fat (amen). For the foods to be made palatable, these are replaced. Thus UPFs often contain higher amounts of sugar, salt and fat.

Third, and most controversially, some argue it's the processing that's inherently bad. In my opinion, I think the evidence supporting this third reason is, at best, equivocal and, at worst, entirely absent.

Regardless of the underlying reasons, there's much evidence that consumption of too much UPF is linked to poorer health outcomes, exemplified by the recent meta-analyses of 45 different studies encompassing nearly 10 million people and published in the *British Medical Journal*. The authors reported

direct associations between exposure to UPFs and 32 health parameters spanning mortality, cancer, mental health, respiratory, cardiovascular, gastrointestinal and metabolic health outcomes.

An open and shut case, surely? Well, hold your horses for a second, because the devil, as always, is in the detail.

My main issue with the UPF concept is its imprecision. The term UPF covers a broad spectrum of food, from deep-fried nuggets derived from mechanically recovered animal protein high in sugar, salt and fat, to otherwise minimally processed foods with a few emulsifiers and industrial additives.

I can understand how eating too much of the former has contributed to the pandemic of diet-related illnesses we're currently facing. The latter, however, includes mass-produced supermarket bread, where a large proportion of consumed UPF calories come from.

In *The Guardian* piece, I argued that while the privileged few can choose to purchase fancy artisanal sourdough, the cost of such a luxury item is prohibitive to many. (Shockingly, the Food Foundation found that in January 2024, 15 per cent of UK households, or around eight million adults and three million children, were living in food insecurity.)

Ultimately, bread is made from flour, salt, water and yeast. Taste aside, how is supermarket bread worse for you than fancy bread?

In a letter of response to my article, Chris Young from the Real Bread Campaign asserted that: “Lactic acid bacterial fermentation, fundamental to the process of making genuine sourdough bread, leads to changes in flavour and, as a growing body of evidence suggests, it might have health and nutritional benefits.”

In an interview with *The Guardian*, author and broadcaster Dr Chris van Tulleken said: “If we look at a loaf of basic supermarket bread, versus a loaf of real bread... the supermarket bread will be extremely high in salt and generally high in sugar, above the recommended level. It will have a high energy density.

“We know energy density, the number of calories per 100g of food, is really, really important for weight gain. And then the supermarket bread will be extremely soft meaning you eat it quicker and consume the calories before you become full.”

I broadly agree with the points made by each Chris. Traditional sourdough is different from the supermarket loaf, which is easier to eat and may (though not always) have some added sugar. The artisan sourdough, however, is almost always higher in salt; it's one of the reasons it tastes so nice!

The ubiquity of UPFs in our food system does require sober and non-hysterical debate. But I stand by my assertion that there's little evidence to show that supermarket bread is bad for you. I'm not 'anti' fancy bread. But I am against shaming a large section of society that lacks the resources to buy and enjoy it.