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Why taking on ultra-processed foods is like the battle against Big Tobacco

The fight against potentially harmful industrially manufactured foods is hard because the food industry has been playing its cards cleverly.

Teo Yik Ying

We consume them without a thought, but ultra-processed foods are like cigarettes for this generation. They harm our health but are so smartly designed and marketed that we often ignore the dangers.

These industrially manufactured products, laden with ingredients and additives not commonly used in home cooking, have become ubiquitous in supermarkets, convenience stores, and fast-food outlets worldwide.

The ingredient lists of such foods often include words such as "emulsifiers", "preservatives", "artificial flavourings", or "high fructose corn syrup", which are ingredients you will never find in fresh, natural foods. The primary purpose of these additives is to improve the shelf life, taste, texture, and appearance of the food.

The rise of these products marks a new frontier in our ongoing battle over food and nutrition, posing a significant threat to public health and echoing the tactics once employed by the tobacco industry.

The alarm over ultra-processed foods was first raised back in the mid-1990s by a Brazilian expert on public health nutrition, Professor Carlos Monteiro, who observed the rising rates of obesity among children.

By studying the food buying patterns of Brazilian households, Prof Monteiro and his team observed that families were making more purchases of instant noodles, sausages, packaged breads, and cookies, instead of basic ingredients such as beans, rice, and fresh meats.

They were the first to coin the term "ultra-processed foods" and to establish a strong linkage between such products and negative health outcomes.

It was clear that the dietary shift towards these convenience

foods was contributing to a rise in obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases in Brazil.

APPEAL OF SUCH FOODS

Ultra-processed foods are designed for convenience, shelf stability, and mass consumption, making them highly appealing to our fast-paced modern lifestyles.

However, these foods represent a significant departure from traditional diets centred on fresh, minimally processed foods.

They are typically low in essential nutrients and fibre but high in sugars, saturated fats, and salt.

Common examples include sugary drinks, instant noodles, packaged snacks, sweetened cereals, ready-to-eat meals, and reconstituted meat products such as nuggets, sausages, and hot dogs.

Even seemingly healthy options like flavoured yogurts, packaged fruit juices, instant oatmeal, store-bought bread, and granola bars often contain preservatives, emulsifiers, added sugars, and artificial flavours.

Efficient production methods and global supply chains have made ultra-processed foods affordable and available to many corners of the world.

However, the health implications of regularly consuming such foods are severe.

These products are linked to obesity, Type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, and certain cancers.

A study published in the British Medical Journal found that a 10 per cent increase in the proportion of ultra-processed foods in the diet was associated with a significant increase in the risk of cardiovascular disease.

Additives and preservatives can disrupt metabolic processes and contribute to inflammatory conditions.

Emerging research suggests these foods negatively impact gut micro-organisms, increasing harmful bacteria while reducing beneficial ones. This weakens the immune system and can affect mental health, contributing to anxiety, depression, and cognitive decline.

Additionally, ultra-processed foods tend to be addictive due to flavour optimisation and marketing tactics, perpetuating unhealthy eating habits and overconsumption.

The combination of high sugar, fats, and salt content with engineered flavour profiles makes these foods difficult to resist, leading to a



Informative labelling such as the Healthier Choice Symbol helps guide consumers to make healthier food choices. The battle against ultra-processed foods is the next critical step in our ongoing food battles, says the writer. LIANHE ZAOBAO FILE PHOTO

cycle of dependency and poor dietary choices.

Beyond the impact on individual health, such foods have been found to worsen social inequities.

Ultra-processed foods often form a significant portion of the diet for lower socio-economic groups, offering calories at a lower cost but lacking essential nutrition. The long shelf-life and convenience of such foods present accessible solutions to those with limited financial resources.

However, this reliance on cheap, nutritionally deficient foods predisposes these populations to a range of physical ailments, harms their overall mental well-being, and perpetuates health disparities.

After all, lower-income communities globally face higher rates of obesity, diabetes, and other diet-related diseases, which further entrench social and economic disadvantages.

BIG TOBACCO TACTICS

The tactics of the food industry bear a striking resemblance to those of Big Tobacco.

Just as the tobacco industry

uses sophisticated marketing and lobbying to downplay the health risks of smoking, the food industry employs similar strategies to promote ultra-processed foods.

Marketing campaigns target vulnerable populations, including children and adolescents, through television advertisements, online platforms, and promotional tie-ins with popular media and celebrities.

Colourful packaging, cartoon characters, and enticing flavour profiles further enhance their appeal, embedding brand loyalty from a young age and shaping dietary preferences into adulthood.

The food industry also employs psychological insights to design highly palatable products, while strategically designing portion sizes and packaging to encourage overconsumption.

In fact, food engineers meticulously craft formulations to optimise taste, texture, and shelf life, often relying on combinations of sugars, fats, and additives to create hyper-palatable products that trigger reward centres in the brain, akin to the addictive properties of certain substances.

In addition to marketing tactics, the food industry wields considerable influence through lobbying efforts aimed at shaping public policy.

They promote narratives that industrially manufactured foods offer an affordable solution to global hunger while lobbying against regulatory measures that could curtail sales or require clearer labelling of ingredients.

For example, in the 1960s a sugar industry group called the Sugar Research Foundation actively funded research that downplayed the role of sugar in heart disease and shifted the blame to fats. Such manipulation of scientific research has had long-lasting effects on public health policies and perceptions.

COUNTERING THE CHALLENGE

The challenges posed by ultra-processed foods need to be tackled on different fronts.

To start with, such products must be required to display clear and informative nutritional labelling so that consumers can make informed choices about their food purchases.

Countries such as Canada, Chile,

France, Mexico and Uruguay mandate front-of-pack labels on food products, with warning signs displayed on those that exceed certain nutritional thresholds.

Singapore's Healthier Choice Symbol and Nutri-Grade front-of-pack labels were also introduced with precisely the same intention to guide consumers to make healthier food choices.

Data from the Health Promotion Board shows such regulatory labels are effective in shifting consumption towards the healthier offerings.

At the same time, the food industry has also reformulated products either to earn the Healthier Choice Symbol or avoid poorer Nutri-Grade ratings.

Policies imposing taxes on sugary beverages and high-calorie snacks have also successfully reduced consumption, influencing the industry to reformulate and reduce sugar, salt, and fat in many products, and generating revenue for public health initiatives.

For example, the introduction of Mexico's soda tax subsequently saw a significant decrease in the consumption of sugary drinks, and an increase in water purchases.

We can also promote healthier eating habits from a young age if the advertising of unhealthy foods to children and adolescents is restricted, and alternatives such as fresh produce, whole grains, and minimally processed meats are promoted.

In fact, the battle against ultra-processed foods is the next critical step in our ongoing food battles.

Just as we have confronted the excessive consumption of sugar and salt, we must now tackle the pervasive presence of these products in our diets.

The escalating rates of obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases worldwide are driven by the deadly combination of sedentary lifestyles and

increasing consumption of ultra-processed foods, and yet these burdens fall disproportionately on segments of society that would benefit most from healthier eating.

The food industry will continue to innovate to provide options that appeal to the taste buds of the masses, at a price point that is affordable to most, while ensuring these products can be kept viable for longer in order to reach the many.

However, this innovation often comes at the expense of nutrition and health, and we need to act urgently to tackle this. While pushing evidence-based public policies and public education, we need to hold food industries accountable for their practices.

It is time to ensure our diets nourish us, rather than harm us.

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