October 22, 2025

Environmental Working Group's Comment on the FDA's *Ultra-Processed Foods; Request for Information* (Docket No. FDA-2025-N-1793)

The Environmental Working Group (EWG) submits this comment in response to the Food and Drug Administration's request for data and information to develop a uniform definition of ultra-processed foods (UPFs) for human food products in the US food supply.

Since 1993, EWG has provided the scientific foundation for policy changes protecting public health from threats in the US food supply. Recently, EWG played a leading role in passing the nation's first bipartisan bill to protect kids from the harms of UPFs in schools.[1]

UPFs now account for more than half of all calories consumed in the US.[2] Diets high in UPFs are linked to increased risk of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, depressive disorders, and some cancers, as well as higher rates of all-cause mortality.[3,4,5] Engineered to be hyperpalatable, UPFs may even meet established scientific criteria for addictive substances.[6,7]

Consumers have little guidance to help them make meaningful distinctions between ultra-processed foods that can harm health and less processed foods that can support health. Misleading marketing makes this task particularly difficult, as health-related cues are used to package and promote many UPFs.[8] As documented by the *2025 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee*, the lack of a consistent definition of

---

[1] California enacts landmark state law to protect schoolkids from harmful ultra-processed food. Environmental Working Group. https://www.ewg.org/news-insights/news-release/2025/10/california-enacts-landmark-state-law-protect-schoolkids-harmful. Published October 8, 2025.

[2] Monteiro CA, Cannon G, Levy RB, et al. Ultra-processed foods: What They Are and How to Identify Them. *Public Health Nutrition*. 2019;22(5):936-941. doi: 10.1017/S1368980018003762

[3] Lane MM, Gamage E, Du S, et al. Ultra-processed food exposure and adverse health outcomes: umbrella review of epidemiological meta-analyses. *BMJ*. 2024;384(8419):e077310. doi: 10.1136/bmj-2023-077310

[4] Elizabeth L, Machado P, Zinöcker M, Baker P, Lawrence M. Ultra-Processed Foods and Health Outcomes: A Narrative Review. *Nutrients*. 2020;12(7). doi: 10.3390/nu12071955

[5] Chen X, Zhang Z, Yang H, et al. Consumption of ultra-processed foods and health outcomes: a systematic review of epidemiological studies. *Nutrition Journal*. 2020;19(1). doi: 10.1186/s12937-020-00604-1

[6] Brownell KD, Gold MS. *Food and Addiction*. Oxford University Press; 2012. doi: 10.1093/med:psych/9780199738168.001.0001

[7] Gearhardt AN, DiFeliceantonio AG. Highly processed foods can be considered addictive substances based on established scientific criteria. *Addiction*. 2022;118(4). doi: 10.1111/add.16065

[8] Hall MG, Grummon AH. The case for stronger regulation of deceptive nutrition-related claims on unhealthy food. *PLoS Medicine.* 2025;22(8). doi: 10.1371/journal.pmed.1004724

ultra-processed foods serves as a barrier to implementing policy solutions that can address the continuing crisis of diet-related disease on a population level.[9]

EWG commends the FDA for taking steps to address this issue and strongly recommends the following framework to define UPFs for US policy and regulatory applications:

UPFs are foods that contain one or more cosmetic additives *and* are high in saturated fat, added sugar, or sodium (HFSS) or contain a non-nutritive sweetener (NNS).

This framework is best positioned to provide consumers with clear and actionable nutrition guidance and meet broader public health goals of reducing diet-related disease.

Supporting evidence and other considerations related to this framework are summarized below.

Cosmetic additives are a functional indicator of food processing.

Nearly all UPF classification systems include cosmetic additives, which serve as practical indicators of the processing a food has undergone.[10]

As described by the authors of the NOVA classification system:

> Cosmetic additives … are flavours, flavour enhancers, colours, emulsifiers, emulsifying salts, sweeteners, thickeners, and anti-foaming, bulking, carbonating, foaming, gelling and glazing agents. These classes of additives disguise undesirable sensory properties created by ingredients, processes or packaging used in the manufacture of ultra-processed foods, or else give the final product sensory properties especially attractive to see, taste, smell and/or touch.[2]

California's *Real Food, Healthy Kids Act* (AB 1264) defines cosmetic additives as any additive having any of 8 FDA-defined technical effects: colors; flavoring agents and adjuvants; flavor enhancers;

[9] Scientific Report of the 2025 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee. 2024. *Scientific Report of the 2025 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee: Advisory Report to the Secretary of Health and Human Services and Secretary of Agriculture.* U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. doi: 10.52570/DGAC2025

[10] Popkin BM, Miles DR, Taillie LS, Dunford EK. A policy approach to identifying food and beverage products that are ultra-processed and high in added salt, sugar and saturated fat in the United States: a cross-sectional analysis of packaged foods. *Lancet Regional Health Americas*. 2024;32:100713. doi: 10.1016/j.lana.2024.100713

emulsifiers and emulsifier salts; non-nutritive sweeteners; stabilizers and thickeners, surface-active agents; and propellants, aerating agents, and gases.[11]

To exclude cosmetic additives from the definition of UPFs would be to discard the most useful tool available to approximate the extent and purpose of food processing.

Should the FDA require companies to disclose all food processing steps in detail—for example, whether the food has been chemically synthesized or extracted—processing methods themselves might be incorporated in the definition of UPFs. In the absence of such a requirement, the best available proxy are cosmetic additives that food companies are already mandated to disclose.

HFSS criteria can help avoid consumer confusion and achieve broader public health goals.

Some UPF classification systems also address nutrients of concern, including high levels of saturated fat, added sugar, and sodium (HFSS).

If the primary aim of defining UPFs is to improve public health, HFSS criteria must be included. Where cosmetic additives play a role in producing food with attractive sensory properties, engineered combinations of HFSS play a role in producing food that is hyperpalatable, energy-dense, and of low nutritional value—all of which can contribute to overconsumption and negative health outcomes.[9]

The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) Nutrient Profile Model identifies processed foods high in added sugar, sodium, total fat, saturated fat, and trans fat based on World Health Organization (WHO) Population Nutrient Intake Goals.[12] Scaled to average daily energy needs, PAHO standards are appropriate even for small packages or portion sizes, ensuring consistency in the UPF designation.

Frameworks incorporating cosmetic additives and HFSS or NNS also provide a meaningful distinction between ultra-processed foods that can harm health and less processed foods that can support health. EWG Food Scores, which classifies packaged foods by NOVA processing group, nutrition concerns, and ingredient concerns, demonstrates that nearly 1 in 5 foods (18%) in the Food Scores database could be considered healthier processed foods according to these criteria.[13]

---

[11] AB-1264 Pupil Nutrition: Restricted School Foods and Ultraprocessed Foods of Concern: Prohibition. https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202520260AB1264.

[12] Nutrient profile model. PAHO/WHO | Pan American Health Organization. https://www.paho.org/en/nutrient-profile-model. Published May 10, 2021.

[13] Food Scores. EWG | Environmental Working Group. https://www.ewg.org/foodscores/

If the FDA definition were more inclusive (i.e., resulted in a vast majority of packaged foods to be classified as UPFs), it would be difficult for consumers to use this information to make healthier choices without eliminating processed foods altogether—an option that isn't feasible for many families. If the FDA definition were more exclusive (i.e., resulted in a small minority of packaged foods to be classified as UPFs), it would be unlikely to prompt significant shifts in consumer purchases, and therefore unlikely to improve health.

Definitions of UPFs that focus solely on ingredient lists or selected additives are insufficient.

The placement of an ingredient on an ingredient list should not be a factor in the determination of whether a food is considered ultra-processed. This is primarily because food packages list ingredients in descending order by weight, which is not a useful basis for assessing additives that can cause adverse effects in small doses. For example, a slice of processed cheese containing tartrazine (Yellow 5) might weigh 28 grams; behavioral changes have been observed in children who consume tartrazine in doses of 10 *milligrams* or less.[14]

Definitions of UPFs based on a limited number of additives—like the list of 11 ingredients banned by the *Arizona Healthy Schools Act* (HB 2164)—do not capture the full range of ultra-processed foods posing potential health threats.[15] As industry reformulates packaged foods to align with new requirements, it will be difficult for these policies and regulations to remain current and respond to new health concerns and challenges.

FDA should reform its evaluation of food additives to assess all possible effects.

FDA should both review chemicals already in commerce that have been linked to health harms and narrow the loophole that allows chemical companies to decide whether new chemicals are safe to consume. The FDA should also propose Front-of-Package labeling to help consumers identify UPFs—not just foods that are high in fat, sugar and salt, as FDA has proposed. This is important for delivering clear and consistent guidance to consumers and avoiding any confusion about which nutrition concerns to prioritize and what foods to purchase.

[14] Rowe K, Rowe K. Synthetic food coloring and behavior: A dose response effect in a double-blind, placebo-controlled, repeated-measures study. The Journal of Pediatrics. 1994;125(5):691-698. doi:10.1016/s0022-3476(94)70059-1

[15] HB-2164 Arizona Healthy Schools Act. https://resources.finalsite.net/images/v1755537367/cusd80com/s1dbyws4hxsb0ezuhmtj/HB2164.pdf

EWG urges FDA to take swift action to adopt a definition of UPFs that incorporates cosmetic additives *and* nutrients of concern to help consumers make healthy dietary choices and address rising rates of diet-related disease in the US population.

EWG appreciates the opportunity to provide these comments. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Environmental Working Group
1250 I Street NW, Suite 1000
Washington, DC 20005
sarah.reinhardt@ewg.org