

Protecting children from ultra-processed foods



The *Lancet* Series on ultra-processed foods (UPFs) and human health reveals that global proliferation of UPFs has become one of the most urgent yet inadequately addressed threats to human health in the 21st century.¹⁻³ With growing evidence linking UPFs and ultra-processed dietary patterns to child malnutrition and ill health, the question is not whether action is needed, but why so many countries have yet to take meaningful action.

Children are uniquely vulnerable to UPFs and ultra-processed dietary patterns. Taste preferences are formed in early childhood, and repeated exposure to UPFs conditions lifelong preferences for sweet, salty, and artificially flavoured foods.⁴ Childhood and adolescence are periods of rapid growth and development, during which poor diet quality has profound consequences.^{5,6} Given its mandate to advance children's right to food and nutrition globally, UNICEF works to create healthy food environments and protect children from UPFs by supporting governments in implementing mandatory measures and counteracting industry pressure. UNICEF's review to be published on Dec 3, 2025, finds emerging evidence that links UPF consumption to all forms of malnutrition, metabolic alterations, and mental health concerns in children.⁷ Furthermore, children's developing cognitive abilities make them particularly vulnerable to the marketing of UPFs, especially when marketing strategies are deliberately tailored to appeal to them and exploit their reduced ability to recognise persuasive intent.⁸

Beyond their biological and cognitive vulnerability, children are exposed to UPFs through unhealthy food environments that are shaped by commercial interests. UNICEF's 2025 Child Nutrition Report, *Feeding Profit: How Food Environments are Failing Children*, found that the widespread availability of UPFs and their aggressive marketing in settings where children live, learn, and play make avoiding exposure to these foods virtually impossible.⁹ Childcare settings, sports and recreational facilities, schools, and nearby retail outlets are frequently inundated with UPFs, including through sponsorship arrangements that normalise UPF consumption.¹⁰

The digital ecosystem and digital marketing have intensified this exposure. Algorithms allow children and adolescents to be targeted with unprecedented precision, delivering personalised UPF advertisements that track children across platforms, while influencer marketing

and gaming integrations blur the boundaries between entertainment and advertisement.¹¹ These marketing tactics operate at scale, continuously, and are often invisible to parents and educators who might otherwise intervene.

Although gaps in the evidence base for children justify further research, in their Series paper Carlos A Monteiro and colleagues rightly caution that calls for further research should not be used as a pretext to delay policy action.¹ The threshold for action to protect children from UPFs has already been decisively met across countries of all income levels—particularly given the ethical imperative created by children's vulnerability. Deferring the implementation of policies and legal measures while waiting for perfect evidence amounts to a conscious acceptance of preventable child malnutrition and ill health.

Crucially, countries that have implemented national, mandatory measures, such as restrictions on marketing to children, front-of-pack labels, or taxation, have shown measurable reductions in the purchase and consumption of UPFs.^{2,7} As Gyorgy Scrinis and colleagues describe in their Series paper, countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico are leading the way by implementing policies and legal measures that specifically target UPFs, as well as products high in fats, sugars, or salt (HFSS).² Policies that address HFSS foods can be strengthened by integrating specific UPF markers into nutrient profiling models used for regulatory purposes, such as non-nutritive sweeteners,

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colourants, and flavourings that are not recommended for children.

Effective protection of children from UPFs demands confronting the economic and political power that enables the UPF industry to weaken, delay, or obstruct government action. Governments feel this industry pressure intensely. For example, in a 2023 survey by UNICEF among government officials and civil society representatives in 24 countries, 70% cited industry influence as a major barrier to government-led restrictions on food marketing to children.¹² Such industry strategies are well characterised by Phillip Baker and colleagues in their Series paper: funding research that generates doubt, co-opting public health organisations, threatening legal challenges, and leveraging economic arguments about job losses and trade implications, among others.³ These tactics exploit resource asymmetries between industry and public health advocates that create structural barriers to evidence-based policy making for child nutrition, health, and wellbeing. The strategies are rooted in the high profitability of UPFs, which enables the UPF industry to wield substantial economic and political power.

The right to adequate food and nutrition, enshrined in international human rights frameworks, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child, should be interpreted in light of these contemporary threats. As expressed by the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, states have an obligation to intervene when commercial interests flood food environments with UPFs that undermine children's health.¹³ Protecting children from UPFs is a fulfilment of fundamental rights that children cannot exercise independently—and the failure to act constitutes a violation of these rights by omission.

UN agencies should have a leading role in supporting governments in their response to UPFs. WHO's forthcoming work to develop an operational definition of UPFs will facilitate the development of global guidance to support national policy making. Furthermore, UN agencies should enhance food systems governance by ensuring transparent and accountable rules of engagement that prevent corporate influence across global and national policy platforms, including the Codex Alimentarius Commission, where industry's interference is a major barrier to establishing adequate standards.¹⁴ UN agencies can also support member states in developing mandatory legal measures and policies free from conflicts of interest, monitoring and countering industry

misconduct, collecting standardised data on children's UPF consumption, and establishing global and country-level nutrition targets to gradually eliminate UPFs in children's diets. Challenges such as industry interference in policy making, weak safeguards against conflicts of interest, inadequate monitoring of industry practices, weak regulatory frameworks, and fragmented global and national governance structures will need to be tackled when advancing this agenda.

This *Lancet* Series recommends building a global action network to advance the global response to UPFs, unifying government leaders, development partners, UN agencies, academia, and civil society. UNICEF offers its full support to this network and its work to develop an international policy framework to protect children, families, and societies from UPFs. The *Lancet* Series on UPFs and human health offers a path forward for national governments and the global community to address and reduce the dominance of UPFs in food environments. The case for protecting children from UPFs is scientifically sound, ethically compelling, and achievable. Governments must lead a whole-of-society approach that ensures this generation is the first in which children's rights to nutrition, food, and health are prioritised over corporate profit, and where food economies are aligned with the best interests of children.

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