

POLICY FACTSHEET

Fast foods and other processed foods and cancer

The World Cancer Research Fund's Cancer Prevention Recommendations advise everyone to limit processed foods as part of everyday life to lower cancer risk¹ and to support living well with and beyond cancer².

This factsheet outlines how this recommendation can be rolled out at a population level. It expands advice in World Cancer Research Fund International's Policy Blueprint for cancer prevention, which combines evidence on cancer risk – our Cancer Prevention Recommendations – with policy advice for population-level prevention.



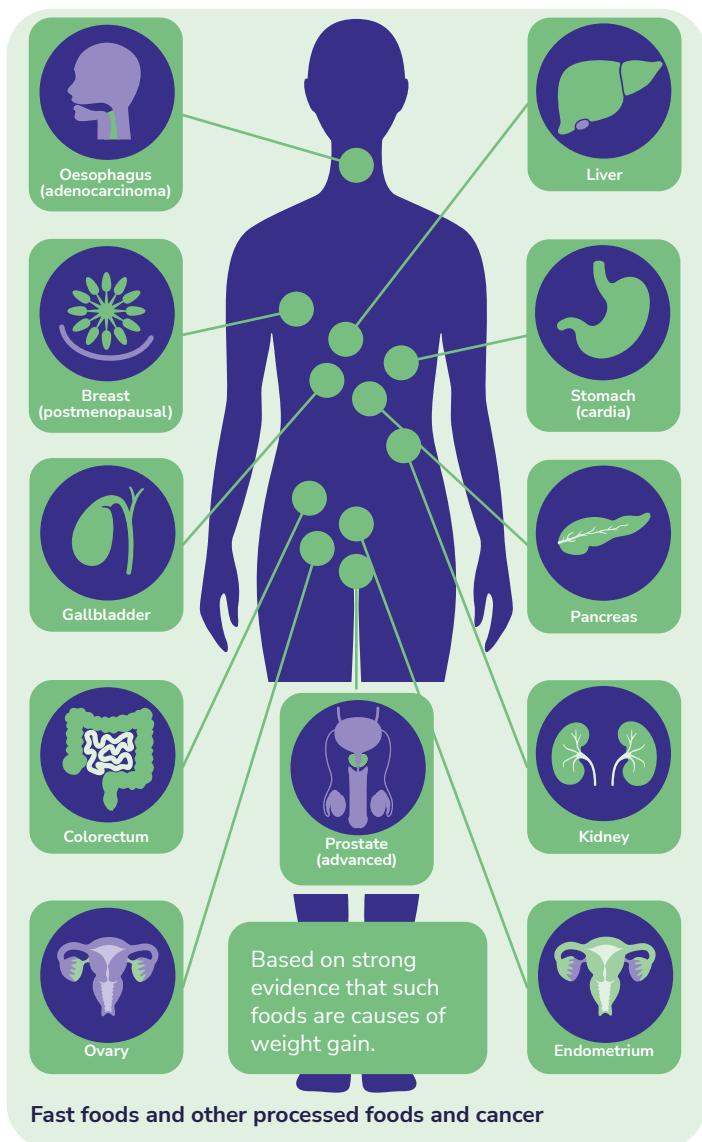
CANCER PREVENTION RECOMMENDATION:

Limit consumption of 'fast-foods' and other processed foods high in fat, starches and sugars

Includes fast-foods (energy-dense, convenience foods), pre-prepared meals, snacks, baked goods, desserts, and confectionery (candy)

For more details, see: wcrf.org/evidence-for-our-recommendations/limit-red-processed-meat

Despite variable data quality, ultra-processed foods* make up between 15-58% of average daily energy in selected nationally representative samples³, and is growing globally⁴. They can reach 70-80% in highest consumption groups in countries such as Canada, United Kingdom and the United States.³ *defined using the NOVA classification system



There are 6 key policy areas to support healthy environments for limiting processed foods high in fat, starches and sugar:



Marketing restrictions



Healthy and safe schools



Fiscal and legal policies



Effectively inform people



Procurement, planning and incentives in communities



Counselling in healthcare

Unlocking the co-benefits of cancer prevention policies

Our policy recommendations have co-benefits in relation to prevention of non-communicable diseases (NCDs), meeting sustainability targets, reversing health inequities, addressing commercial determinants of health and fulfilling human rights. World Cancer Research Fund International's Policy Blueprint for cancer prevention includes an assessment of co-benefits and potential trade-offs when policy goals do not align.

wcrf.org/blueprint-for-cancer-prevention

Marketing restrictions



- Mandatory advertising ban of foods high in fat, sugars and salt, sugary drinks and identifiable less healthy products, online and on TV.
- Restrictions on other types of marketing such as product placement, branding and multi-buy offers.
- Restrictions on sponsorship of sporting events by fast-food and sugary drinks companies.

Fiscal and legal tools



- Taxes on foods high in fat, sugars and salt and sugary drinks, regularly adjusted to inflation.
- Measures to ensure reformulation initiatives are mandatory and cover an appropriate range of nutrients and product categories.
- Subsidies to improve accessibility of healthy foods.

Procurement, planning and incentives in communities



- Nutrition standards for public procurement that ensure compliance with healthy diets.
- Incentives and regulations with robust monitoring and enforcement to reduce “less healthy” food and ingredients used by food producers and retailers and in food service outlets.

An integrated strategy which together addresses the influence of diet, weight, breastfeeding, physical activity and alcohol consumption will have a greater impact on cancer risk and survivorship than individual factors alone. For more information, visit wcrf.org/blueprint-for-cancer-prevention

Healthy and safe schools and other settings



- Restrictions on unhealthy snack food and drinks available in schools canteens, kiosks, vending machines and school events, including sporting events.
- Planning restrictions on food service outlets near schools.

Effectively inform people



- Robust front-of-pack food labelling that shows recommendations and judgements on the healthiness of a product and is based on a government-approved nutrient profile model.
- Improved nutrition education in schools and for educators.

Counselling in healthcare



- Nutrition counselling in primary care.
- Nutrition training for health professionals.



Strategies to support policies on fast foods and other processed foods and cancer

- Develop disincentives such as taxes for producers of mainly unhealthy foods.
- Avoid voluntary agreements on reduction of unhealthy nutrients with producers of unhealthy foods, which have been shown not to work. Instead, use taxes to incentivise reformulation.
- Implement marketing bans to tackle health inequalities. There is evidence that unhealthy foods producers target marketing of their products at the most deprived populations and young people in particular.
- Prioritise policies to discourage consumption of foods high in fat, sugar, salt based on nutrient profile models as these foods have the best evidence of harm.
- Explore a policy response to ultra-processed foods (foods classified based on level of processing) in a way that complements policies addressing foods high in fat, sugar and salt.
- Invest in research to determine the exact mechanisms in ultra-processing that could explain adverse health outcomes.
- Follow international guidance, including the WHO NCD Best Buys⁵.

Our other resources for policy-makers, health professionals and the general public

Resources for policy-makers

- NOURISHING nutrition policy database policydatabase.wcrf.org
- NOURISHING nutrition policy index for Europe and country snapshots wcrf.org/policy/nutrition-policy



Building Momentum reports:

- Lessons on implementing robust restrictions of food and non-alcoholic beverage marketing to children
- Lessons on implementing a robust front-of-pack food label
- Lessons on implementing a robust sugar-sweetened beverage tax
wcrf.org/nutrition-policy-reports

Resources for health professionals and the general public

- wcrf.org/living-well
- aicr.org/resources/media-library
- Resources in Dutch wkof.nl

References

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3. Martini D, Godos J, Bonaccio M, Vitaglione P, Grosso G. Ultra-processed foods and nutritional dietary profile: a meta-analysis of nationally representative samples. *Nutrients*. 2021;13(10):3390.
4. FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO. The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2023: Urbanization, agrifood systems transformation and healthy diets across the rural-urban continuum. Rome: FAO; 2023.
5. World Health Organization. Tackling NCDs: best buys and other recommended interventions for the prevention and control of noncommunicable diseases. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2024.

About us

World Cancer Research Fund International is a leading authority on the links between diet, nutrition, weight and physical activity and cancer. We are an international not-for-profit association that leads and unifies a network of cancer prevention charities, including the American Institute for Cancer Research, World Cancer Research Fund in the UK and Wereld Kanker Onderzoek Fonds in the Netherlands. World Cancer Research Fund International is in official relations with the World Health Organization.

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For a full list of acknowledgements please scan the QR code.



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