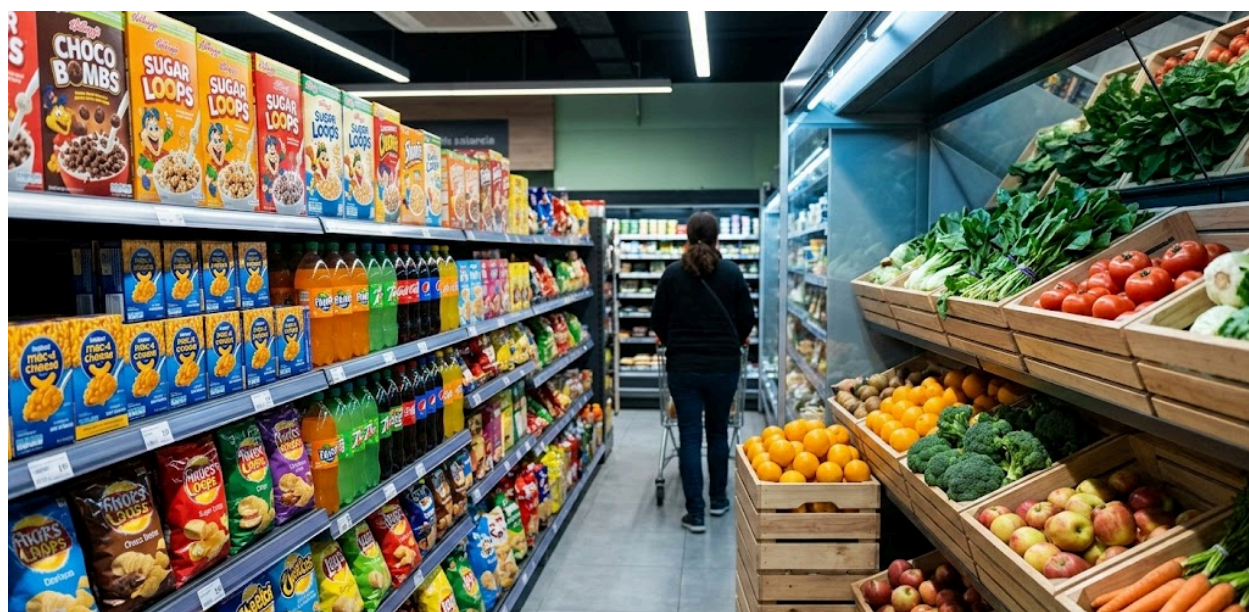


Big Profits, Big Health Problems: The Junk Food Trap

VOCABULARY WORDS

1. **regulate** Verb /'reg.jə.leɪt/ to control an activity or process by means of rules and laws
Example: The government needs to regulate the amount of sugar in soft drinks to protect public health.
2. **addicted** Adjective /ə'dɪk.tɪd/ unable to stop taking a harmful substance or doing a harmful activity
Example: Many people become addicted to caffeine and feel tired without their morning coffee.
3. **engineered** Adjective /,en.dʒɪ'niəd/ designed or built using scientific methods to achieve a specific result
Example: Modern snack foods are often engineered to have the perfect "crunch" that keeps people eating.
4. **substance** Noun /'sʌb.stəns/ a particular kind of matter with uniform properties
Example: Scientists are worried about a specific chemical substance found in plastic food packaging.
5. **restriction** Noun /rɪ'strɪk.jən/ a rule or law that limits what you can do or what is allowed to happen
Example: There is a strict restriction on selling energy drinks to children under sixteen.
6. **seriousness** Noun /'sɪə.ri.əs.nəs/ the quality of being important or deserving a lot of thought and attention
Example: The doctor explained the seriousness of the illness to the patient's family.



Ultra-processed foods (UPFs) should be regulated like tobacco, according to a recent study from the US. The researchers looked at how UPFs are made, marketed, and distributed and compared them with the methods used by the tobacco industry. They found that UPF

manufacturers are using many of the same strategies that tobacco companies once used to sell their products and get consumers addicted to them.

UPFs contain ingredients that would not normally be found in a home kitchen and have been linked to a range of serious health problems. They include all sorts of foods—some that we may not immediately think of as unhealthy, such as instant oatmeal or pasta sauce. However, the researchers focused specifically on UPFs that are high in certain fats and carbohydrates, both of which can be used to make foods addictive.

The researchers said that these substances act in the same way as nicotine in cigarettes. Like nicotine, the amounts of fat and carbohydrates in UPFs are engineered to make us feel good. The study also noted that these substances produce a quick "hit" of pleasure that quickly fades, leaving the consumer wanting more. This cycle makes it very difficult for people to stop eating these products once they start.

The similarities with cigarettes do not stop with the substances they contain. The researchers note that manufacturers in both industries use "health washing," where products are marketed in a way that makes them seem less harmful than they truly are. For example, foods with "low fat" or "sugar-free" labels often still contain addictive combinations of fats and carbohydrates. This marketing tactic can mislead consumers into thinking they are making a healthy choice.

So, what should be done about UPFs if they are so dangerous? The researchers suggest applying the lessons learned from tobacco regulation. This could mean increasing taxes on the least healthy UPFs, placing restrictions on advertising, and introducing clearer labeling on food packaging. They argue that regulators should stop thinking of UPFs as just "food" and instead see them as "addictive, industrially engineered substances."

Treating the junk food crisis with the same seriousness once applied to tobacco could significantly improve public well-being. By limiting the influence of large food corporations, society might finally break the correlation between the rise of ultra-processed diets and increasing rates of chronic disease. Ultimately, the goal is to create an environment where making a healthy choice is a necessity that is easy to achieve, rather than a difficult sacrifice.

DISCUSSION

1. Do you agree that junk food is as addictive as cigarettes?
2. Should the government have the right to tax "unhealthy" foods to discourage people from buying them?
3. How often do you check the ingredients list on the back of food packaging?
4. Do you think "sugar-free" or "low-fat" snacks are actually better for your health?
5. Who is more responsible for the obesity crisis: the companies that make the food or the people who buy it?
6. How has social media changed the way we view "healthy" and "unhealthy" eating habits?
7. If you had to stop eating one ultra-processed food forever, which one would be the hardest to give up?