

Too many ultra-processed foods increase the risk of cancer

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A study reports that the consumption of ultra-processed industrial foods is associated with a significant increase in certain types of cancer, in particular those of the ovary and breast.

A study carried out at Laval University recently taught us that Canadians, in particular Quebecers, have eating habits that could be described as mediocre, characterized by a lack of healthy foods such as plants (fruits, vegetables, whole grains) and an excess of red meats and deli meats (1).

Overall, these results indicate that the quality of our diet is no better than that of our American neighbours, who are nevertheless reputed to be among those who eat the most poorly. And there is no doubt that it contributes to the significant increase in metabolic diseases (obesity, type 2 diabetes) observed in recent decades.

TOO MANY PROCESSED FOODS

One of the most serious problems that arises from a deficiency in fresh foods, as noted in the Quebec study, is that it is generally accompanied by an increase in the intake of ultra-processed foods.

These industrial products, produced on a large scale by assembling abundant and inexpensive substances (fat, sugar, salt), are very rich in energy, but paradoxically very poor in essential nutrients such as fibers and omega-3 fats, and do not bring much positive for health.

Worse still, these foods are formulated in such a way as to provide pleasant organoleptic sensations (palatability) which encourage their overconsumption and can thus cause excessive energy intake which promotes excess weight and the development of obesity (2).

INCREASED RISK OF CANCER

In addition to their nutritional deficiency and metabolic effects, another concern associated with ultra-processed foods is that they may contain substances suspected of being carcinogens.

Aspartame, certain emulsifiers, per- and polyfluoroalkylated substances (PFAS), acrylamide or even certain endocrine disruptors, commonly used in the manufacturing and/or packaging of these products, have in fact all been repeatedly associated to an increased risk of cancer.

So, in addition to increasing the risk of obesity, itself an important risk factor for cancer, these substances could also contribute to increasing the risk of cancer in people who regularly consume ultra-processed foods.

This is particularly well highlighted by a British study which analyzed the incidence of several types of cancer according to the level of consumption of ultra-processed foods (3).



In this study, carried out among 197,426 people aged 40 to 69 followed for a period of 10 years, the researchers noted that each 10% increase in the daily energy provided in the form of ultra-processed foods was associated with a slight increase (6%) in the risk of mortality, all cancers combined.

However, when the same analysis is performed looking specifically at 34 distinct types of cancers, they noted a marked increase in mortality risk from ovarian (30%) and breast (16%) cancer, with these increases even reaching 91% for ovarian cancer and 62% for women who consumed the largest quantities of these products (last quartile).

The exact biochemical mechanisms involved in the rise of these two cancers remain to be clearly identified, but the conclusion remains implacable all the same: ultra-processed foods are harmful to health and should be consumed with extreme moderation.

- (1) Ngueta G et al. Canadians adults fail their dietary quality examination twice. *Nutrients*, 2023;15(3):637
- (2) Fazzino TL et al. Ad libitum meal energy intake is positively influenced by energy density, eating rate and hyper-palatable food across four dietary patterns. *Nature Food* (Published online, January 30th 2023)
- (3) Chang K et al. Ultra-processed food consumption, cancer risk and cancer mortality: a large-scale prospective analysis within the UK Biobank. *eClinical Medicine*, 2023;56:101840