

Ultraprocessed Foods in the U.S.: Recommended Definitions and Policies

June 2026

Healthy Eating Research (based at Duke University) convened a national expert panel to develop evidence-informed recommendations to guide policymakers working to limit ultraprocessed food (UPF) exposure at federal and state levels. The 14-member panel, chaired by Jim Krieger, MD, MPH and Lindsey Smith Taillie, PhD, was charged with assessing evidence to 1) recommend a definition of UPF suitable for guiding policy development and 2) identify policy options to reduce exposure and consumption of UPF in the U.S.

U.S. Policymakers Need a Clear Evidence-based Definition of UPFs and Policies to Reduce Harms from UPFs

The U.S. has one of the highest levels of UPFs consumption in the world. UPFs are industrially produced products containing few or no whole-food ingredients, designed for long shelf life and high sensory appeal. They are cheap to produce, widely available, and created to maximize consumption. High UPF consumption is directly linked to poor health outcomes, including cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, obesity, depression and anxiety, and premature death.

No consensus definition exists, with current proposed definitions and policies using inconsistent, unscientific, and impractical definitions. A clear, evidence-informed definition is essential for federal action.

Recommended Definition for Policy

The panel recommends using Nova Category 4 as the scientific basis for defining UPF in policy because almost all studies linking UPFs to adverse health outcomes use the Nova classification.

For policy use, the panel recommends a science-based, transparent, and practical definition:

1. **A food product is ultraprocessed if it contains at least one UPF marker ingredient:**

Cosmetic additive

Examples: flavors (natural or artificial), sweeteners (both sugar and non-sugar), emulsifiers, colors (natural or artificial), and thickeners.

and/ or Ingredient of non-culinary use

Examples: industrial ingredients not typically found in home kitchens, like high fructose corn syrup.

2. **Foods that meet FDA's definition for "Healthy" would be exempt from UPF policies.** FDA healthy foods contain: 1) adequate amounts of recommended food groups; and 2) Amounts of added sugar, sodium, and saturated fat less than FDA-recommended levels. Note: We recommend that products containing non-sugar sweeteners would not qualify for this exemption.

This exemption helps avoid capturing UPFs that are recommended by dietitians or nutrition guidelines as healthy choices, such as some whole grain breads, ready-to-eat breakfast cereals, tofu, or yogurt. For example, 85% of breads in the U.S. are UPF, and only 8% also meet FDA "Healthy."

How to Construct a Nova-based UPF Ingredient Marker List

To construct a Nova-based UPF ingredient marker list, compile and cross-reference multiple ingredient datasets against Nova 4 cosmetic additives and non-culinary ingredients, apply them to a current database of U.S. branded food products to flag UPF markers, and update the list annually to capture new and novel products.

The panel also recommends the following top-priority policies with high feasibility and health impact:

1. Restrict procurement of UPFs in institutional settings such as schools, early childhood settings, and government buildings;
2. Fund UPF countermarketing campaigns;
3. Limit UPFs in Dietary Guidelines;
4. Require UPF identity labels on the front of food packages; and
5. Impose taxes on selected UPFs.

The panel also recommended additional policies with lower impact or feasibility for consideration. UPF policies complement, not replace, traditional nutrient- and food group-based approaches. Whether a product is UPF reflects one important dimension of its overall healthfulness.

Learn More:

The full recommendations and executive summary can be found at: <https://bit.ly/UPFdefinition>

Questions can be directed to Healthyeating@duke.edu

Lott ME, Taillie LS, Krieger J, Reed L, Ananthan S, D'Angelo Campos A, Story M. Ultraprocessed Foods in the U.S.: Recommended Definitions and Policies. Durham, NC: Healthy Eating Research, 2026. Available at:

<https://healthyeatingresearch.org/research/ultraprocessed-foods-in-the-u-s-recommended-definitions-and-policies/>

**Healthy
Eating
Research**

