

Which diet is highest in ‘ultra-processed’ foods? Vegan tops list, sparking more nuanced conversation about UPFs

Veganism has the potential to promote healthy eating as people ditch meat – but the rise of ultra-processed foods (UPFs) could hamper its positive effects.

Product launches for plant-based convenience foods tripled between 2013 and 2018. In the UK, [half](#) the population have added meat substitutes to their diets, while almost a third opt for alternative milks.

Many of these [plant-based substitutes](#) are classified as UPFs: foods that have undergone heavy processing to improve their perishability and taste. UPFs are often high in salt, sugar and saturated fat, with additional colourings, preservatives and additives.

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Meat production’s devastating [impact](#) on the environment is well established, but UPFs bring their own costs.

“Ultra-processed food production relies on a relatively small number of commodity crops, like palm, soya, wheat and maize,” says Cliff. Mass production of these crops lends itself to monocultures, which contribute to [deforestation](#), [soil degradation](#) and habitat loss.

The UPF industry could account for as much as 39 per cent of energy use, 45 per cent of biodiversity loss, and a third of greenhouse emissions related to diet, according to one recent study.

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