

Eating more ultra-processed foods linked to poorer bone health, study finds

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A new study from Tulane University found that those who ate more ultra-processed foods had lower bone mineral density and a higher risk of hip fractures. (Photo by iStock)

From flavored yogurts to frozen pizzas, breakfast cereals and instant oats, ultra-processed foods are convenient, often cheaper items designed for a quick bite. In recent years, excess consumption of these foods has also been linked to health risks such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease and some types of cancer.

According to a new study from Tulane University, eating more ultra-processed foods may also be bad for your bones.

The study, [published in *The British Journal of Nutrition*](#), found that those who ate more ultra-processed foods (UPFs) had lower bone mineral density and a higher risk of hip fractures.

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— Lu Qi, co-corresponding author

People consumed, on average, about 8 servings of ultra-processed foods per day, according to the study, which involved more than 160,000 participants from the UK Biobank database. For every 3.7 extra servings eaten per day, the risk of hip fracture increased by 10.5%. While servings differ among food types, that amounts to a frozen dinner entrée, a cookie and a soda.

“Our study cohort was followed for over 12 years, and we found that high intakes of ultra-processed foods were linked to a reduction in bone mineral density at several sites including key areas of the upper femur and the lumbar spine region,” said co-corresponding author Lu Qi, HCA Regents Distinguished Chair and professor at the Celia Scott Weatherhead School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine at Tulane University. “While recent studies have shown that ultra-processed food consumption can affect bone health, this is the first time this relationship has been examined directly in humans.”

Ultra-processed foods are industrially manufactured products made with high amounts of salt, sweeteners and unhealthy fats. They tend to be energy dense and contain little to no whole foods, which are foods free from additives that remain close to their original state. Ultra-processed foods are more commonly consumed in lower- and middle-class households, [according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), and as of 2023, they accounted for approximately 55% of total calories consumed by youths and adults.

“Ultra-processed foods can be easily found on any trip to the grocery store, and these findings add to concerns of how they may affect our bone health,” Qi said.

The study found that the adverse relationship between ultra-processed foods and bone density was most apparent among those under the age of 65 and in people who are underweight (BMI less than 18.5).

Low BMI is a risk factor for bone health and may exacerbate the impacts of ultra-processed foods on bone density. The association may be stronger among those under the age of 65 because of a stronger digestive function that absorbs more of the unhealthy ingredients found in ultra-processed foods, Qi said.

This study builds on previous research examining links between ultra-processed foods consumption and bone health. A [2024 study](#) found high intake of these foods was linked to increased risk of osteoporosis. A [separate study](#) of pregnant women and their children in 2016 found that living closer to fast food outlets was associated with lower bone mineral content in infants.

“Our results are not surprising,” Qi said. “Ultra-processed foods have been consistently associated with various nutrition-related disorders and bone health depends on proper nutrition.”