

Like cigarettes, junk food should come with a warning: ‘Can kill’

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The 1970s was a confusing decade in which to be a smoker. People knew, of course, that smoking was bad for them: the evidence linking it to lung cancer had been incontrovertible since 1956. But despite hiked taxes and restrictions in selling to children, these warnings hadn't fully permeated the atmosphere. How could they? Daily life bathed the brain in the idea that smoking was ne. Cigarettes were advertised in magazines and at sporting events, and a nicotine fog enveloped offices, bars and public transport. Could something that everyone was doing, and which suffused the culture, really be that shockingly dangerous? [...] And this is where we are, I think, in 2024, with what used to be called junk food, and which is now beginning to be called ultra-processed food. UPF is food that has at some stage been ground into unrecognisable pulp and bathed in additives, a definition that is gaining acceptance among experts. But it is nothing too new. We are now, and have been for years, talking about the kind of food that encourages us to eat vast quantities of salt, sugar and fat in one barely chewed gulp. It is hamburgers, crisps, chocolate bars, ice-cream, fizzy drinks and pappy processed cereal.

As with cigarettes in the 70s, much of the evidence is in. Junk food is linked to cancer. Two landmark studies last year showed UPFs caused heart disease and strokes. It is also beyond question that these kinds of foods cause obesity, a condition linked to 30,000 deaths a year in England alone. One in five children are obese by the final year of primary school and levels of obesity are spiralling upwards. Unhealthy diets are, worldwide, now killing more people than tobacco.

But these warnings have yet to filter through to our daily environment, in which junk food is beamed at us from bus stops and TV ad breaks – framed as an indulgence, a guilty pleasure, but not a scourge. [...] Fast food companies follow teens online and use cartoons to sell unhealthy cereals. [...]

Last week, the youth activist movement Bite Back published its study Fuel Us, Don't Fool Us, developed with researchers at Oxford University, and reported that Ferrero made 100% of its UK sales in 2022 from foods high in saturated fat, salt and sugar (HFSS). In response, a company spokesperson claimed it was “supporting consumers” by “offering our products in small, individually wrapped portions” along with “education on how to enjoy our products as part of a balanced lifestyle”. Are you really supposed to stop after a single (wrapped) Ferrero Rocher?

Unilever, which the study found had made 84% of its UK sales from HFSS the same year, stressed its lower fat options. [...] Yet these are foods saturated in unhealthy substances and designed to make you eat more and more of them. There is no such thing as healthy junk food. We know what has to happen next: tobacco has given us the blueprint. Food high in salt, sugar and fat has to be more strictly regulated.

And regulation is the only way. Highly processed food is profitable – the business models of the world's largest food companies rely on it. Expecting them to x themselves is like expecting a red and hungry commuter to resist a burger. [...] Labour claims it will “steamroll” the food industry into a healthier model, banning online junk food ads aimed at children and bringing in more restrictions on packaging. It would be a start.