

A Surprising Nutritional Feature Shared by Nearly 3 in 4 US Comfort Foods

A recent study examined the nutritional quality, processing level, and demographic differences of popular comfort foods in the US using survey and [nutrient](#) database analysis.



Study

A national survey (UCLA Eating in America Study, Dec 2019–Jan 2020) included 2,022 adults recruited using US census-based quotas for age, gender, [race/ethnicity](#), income, and region. Of these, 1,760 had analyzable comfort food data and could nominate up to three comfort foods, yielding 5,280 possible nomination slots. Two research assistants coded responses using a standardized protocol; non-food or unclear answers were excluded from analysis.

Nutritional information for each comfort food was sourced from the United States Department of Agriculture’s What We Eat in America (WWEIA) database. When unavailable, brand websites or food labels were used. Nutrient values per 100g were converted to standard serving sizes. For combination [foods](#), nutrients for each component were calculated and summed.

Foods were classified by nutrient content as high (>20% daily value (DV)), moderate (5–20% DV), or low (<5% DV) sources. Hyperpalatability was assessed using criteria for fat, sugar, sodium, and carbohydrate content, grouping foods as [high-fat/high-sugar](#) (desserts), high-fat/high-sodium (meats/meals), or high-carb/high-sodium (breads/carbs).

UPF status was determined by the Nova classification system. Foods were matched to Nova Group 4, or similar foods if needed. [Combination foods](#)’ UPF content was calculated proportionally.

Results

Of the 2,022 adults surveyed, 1,760 provided analyzable comfort food responses, and around 70% of these named at least one food that could be nutritionally assessed. Men and adults aged 55 and older were somewhat less likely to provide a nutritionally codable food, while [nomination rates](#) did not differ by region.

Despite the variety of responses, Americans largely converged on familiar favorites. Chips topped the list, followed by ice cream, pizza, [chocolate](#) and cookies. Candy, burgers, cake and pasta also ranked highly, while more nutritious choices such as nuts, fruit and vegetables appeared further

down the list. In total, researchers identified 300 nutritionally distinct foods, which they grouped into 132 broader categories.

The nutritional picture was mixed but leaned heavily toward highly palatable and processed foods. In an unweighted analysis of the 300 distinct foods, the average serving contained 223 calories, with 39% from fat and 18% from sugar. Most foods were low in fiber, while nearly three-quarters met criteria for being [hyperpalatable](#).

Ultra-processing was also common, although the figures depended on how it was measured. Across the 300 foods, an average of 57% of calories came from ultra-processed Nova Group 4 sources. Using a stricter definition that required all calories to come from Group 4, 43% of foods qualified as fully [ultra-processed](#), while 36% were both fully ultra-processed and hyperpalatable. The authors said this conservative definition probably underestimated the prevalence of ultra-processed foods.

Pasta stood out as the only top-10 comfort food that was neither hyperpalatable nor classified as 100% ultra-processed. By contrast, all constituent foods making up the top four categories: Chips, [ice cream](#), pizza and chocolate, met both classifications.

Differences between demographic groups were statistically significant but generally small. Men's choices tended to be slightly higher in calories, protein, fat, and [sodium](#), while women's contained somewhat more sugar. Men also favored more high-fat, high-sodium "meats/meal" foods, whereas women nominated more dessert-type foods and fully ultra-processed choices.

Age showed a similar pattern. Compared with adults aged 18–34, those aged 55 and older chose foods averaging about 41 fewer calories per serving, alongside lower amounts of several nutrients, including fat, [carbohydrates](#) and sodium. However, saturated fat and sugar did not significantly differ between the two groups, and there were no significant nutrient differences between adults aged 18–34 and those aged 35–54.

Regional differences were also modest. Northeasterners tended to nominate foods higher in calories and several nutrients than people in the South and Midwest, with some differences also seen in the West. But the nutritional differences between regions amounted to no more than about 4% of recommended daily values, reinforcing the researchers' broader conclusion that where people lived, their age and their gender mattered less than the overall similarities in America's comfort [food choices](#).

Conclusion

The current study highlights the broad variability and commonality among top US adult comfort foods. Demographic differences appear minimal, and the dominance of these foods may reflect the widespread influence of the [US food system](#), underscoring opportunities to guide healthier comfort food choices in contexts of stress or negative affect.

The study has several limitations. Participants were asked to name their favorite comfort foods rather than report what they actually ate, so the researchers could not determine how often or how much these foods were consumed, whether people turned to them during periods of [stress](#), or how they fit into their broader diets and health.

The researchers also gave each of the 300 unique foods equal weight in the nutritional analysis, regardless of how frequently it was nominated, while nutrient databases and [food-classification](#) methods introduced additional uncertainty.

Future research should aim to address these gaps by exploring weighted analyses, more nuanced measures of intake, and sociocultural factors shaping comfort food preferences. Continued investigation into the [health implications](#) of comfort eating and the development of tailored interventions will be crucial for informing public health strategies.

Source:

<https://www.news-medical.net/news/20261006/Nearly-3-in-4-US-comfort-foods-share-a-surprising-nutritional-feature.aspx>