

Researchers Find Nearly Three in Four Popular Comfort Foods have Something in Common

Researchers evaluated the [nutritional composition](#), hyperpalatability, ultra-processing, and demographic differences of popular comfort foods among adults in the United States.



Study

The researchers conducted the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Eating in America Study, a [national online survey](#) administered between December 2019 and January 2020.

The survey recruited 2,022 adults aged 18 years or older through Qualtrics, using United States census-based [demographic quotas](#). Participants were asked to name up to three comfort foods and to answer questions about their age, gender, and region of residence. Of the respondents, 1,760 provided analyzable comfort-food data.

Two trained research assistants independently categorized responses using a standardized protocol. They obtained nutritional information from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) databases and, when necessary, from brand-specific [nutrition labels](#).

Nutrients assessed included calories, protein, carbohydrates, total sugars, [dietary fiber](#), total fat, saturated fat, and sodium. Nutrient quantities per typical serving were compared with recommended daily values.

Foods were classified as hyperpalatable (HPFs) based on established criteria regarding combinations of fats, sugars, sodium, and [carbohydrates](#). To evaluate industrial food processing, the Nova classification was used, with foods classified as ultra-processed when 100% of calories came from Nova Group 4.

The researchers calculated descriptive statistics and evaluated demographic differences using two-sample t-tests, [analysis of variance](#) (ANOVA), and chi-square tests.

Findings

Of the 1,760 respondents with analyzable [comfort-food data](#), 1,228 (69.8%) identified at least one food that could be nutritionally assessed.

Researchers identified 300 distinct foods and [beverages](#), which were consolidated into 132 groups based on similarities in ingredients and preparation.

The five most popular groups were chips, ice cream, [pizza](#), chocolate, and cookies. The sample also included candy, hamburgers, cakes, pasta, bread, cheese, macaroni and cheese, fries, sodas, and chicken dishes.

Foods generally considered more nutritious, including nuts, fruits, [eggs](#), vegetables, and salads, also appeared among the 50 most frequently nominated groups.

The 300 distinct comfort foods contained an unweighted average of 223.1 calories per estimated serving. Each food contributed equally regardless of nomination frequency. On average, 39.2% of the calories came from fat, while 18.3% came from [sugar](#). Dietary fiber averaged 1.5 grams per serving.

Many foods provided moderate amounts of several nutrients, but 60.7% were low in dietary fiber. By comparison, 29.7% were high in saturated fat, and 31.7% were high in [sodium](#). In addition, 23.3% of the foods were high sources of total fat, while 17.0% were high in total sugar. The analysis measured total rather than added sugar, using a UK reference intake of 90 grams per day.

72.7% of the comfort foods studied met [hyperpalatability](#) criteria. The most common classification was the high-fat, high-sodium "meats/meal" type, identified in 54.3% of foods. Foods high in fat and sugar accounted for 21.3%, while those high in carbohydrates and sodium represented 11.0%. Some foods met multiple hyperpalatability criteria.

Under the study's strict definition of ultra-processing, 42.7% of foods qualified as ultra-processed foods (UPFs), with all calories attributed to Nova Group 4. This threshold excluded foods deriving less than 100% of their [calories](#) from ultra-processed components, potentially underestimating the prevalence of ultra-processing. Of all assessed foods, 36.0% were both hyperpalatable and ultra-processed.

All constituent foods within the four most popular groups, namely chips, [ice cream](#), pizza, and chocolate, met both classifications. Pasta was the only food among the top 10 that did not meet either distinction.

[Demographic differences](#) were statistically significant but generally small.

Men's preferred foods had about 33 more calories per serving than women's and were higher in protein, [saturated fat](#), fiber, and sodium.

Women's preferred foods contained more total sugar. Adults aged 55 years or older nominated foods with lower average calories, protein, fat, [carbohydrates](#), fiber, and sodium than adults aged 18–34 years; saturated fat and total sugar did not differ significantly.

Regional differences were also observed. Northeastern residents nominated foods with higher levels of several nutrients than Southern and [Midwestern residents](#). Most demographic differences were equivalent to less than 5% of the recommended daily intake for the respective nutrients.

The researchers also acknowledged several limitations. The study recorded nominated preferences rather than actual intake, so the researchers could not assess consumption frequency, portion sizes, or stress levels. Nutritional estimates also relied on standard food descriptions, and the non-random survey was conducted before the [COVID-19](#) pandemic and the widespread use of glucagon-like peptide-1">GLP-1 medications.

Conclusion

Popular comfort foods in the United States vary considerably but share common preferences, particularly chips, ice cream, pizza, chocolate, and [cookies](#). Many provide limited dietary fiber, while substantial proportions contain high levels of saturated fat and sodium.

Most assessed foods met the study's criteria for hyperpalatability, and approximately two-fifths were classified as entirely ultra-processed. Nutritional differences varied by [gender](#), age, and geographic region, but the differences were generally small.

These findings suggest that promoting [healthier versions](#) of popular comfort foods may be more practical than focusing exclusively on demographic groups, but the study did not test this approach.

Source:

<https://www.news-medical.net/news/20261022/Nearly-three-in-four-popular-comfort-foods-have-something-in-common-researchers-find.aspx>