Ultra-processed food

Ultra-processed foods (UPFs) have become a major part of modern diets, especially in Western countries. These foods are made mostly or entirely from substances extracted from foods or synthesised in laboratories, and are often high in sugar, unhealthy fats, salt, and artificial additives. Examples include packaged snacks, sugary drinks, instant noodles, processed meats, and ready-made meals. While they are convenient and appealing, mounting evidence suggests that UPFs can have serious negative effects on health, including an increased risk of chronic inflammatory diseases like psoriasis.

How UPF affects the body

Ultra-processed foods are associated with a higher risk of developing psoriasis because of the way they impact the body's inflammatory and immune systems. Unlike natural or minimally processed foods, UPFs are often low in fibre, vitamins, and minerals, but high in calories and substances that can trigger inflammation. The high levels of refined sugars and unhealthy fats in these foods can lead to spikes in blood sugar and fat levels, which in turn promote chronic, low-grade inflammation throughout the body, which is a key driver of psoriasis flares.

Moreover, many UPFs contain artificial additives, preservatives, and emulsifiers that can disrupt the balance of healthy bacteria in the gut (the gut microbiome). A healthy gut microbiome is essential for regulating the immune system. When this balance is disturbed, it can lead to a 'leaky gut', where harmful substances pass from the gut into the bloodstream, further stimulating the immune system and promoting inflammation. This cycle of inflammation and immune activation is particularly problematic for people who are genetically susceptible to psoriasis, as it can trigger or worsen the condition.[1,2]

Evidence from recent research

A recent large-scale published study provides strong evidence for the link between UPFs and psoriasis.[1] The study followed more than 120,000 adults for nearly 13 years, collecting detailed information about their diets and health outcomes. The researchers found that for every 10% increase in the proportion of UPFs in a person's diet, the risk of developing psoriasis increased by 6%. Those in the highest group of UPF consumption had a 31% higher risk of psoriasis than those in the lowest group.

Importantly, the association between UPF intake and psoriasis remained strong even after accounting for other risk factors such as age, sex, body weight, alcohol intake, and smoking. This suggests that UPFs themselves, not just their contribution to weight gain or other unhealthy habits, play a direct role in increasing psoriasis risk.

The study also found that the risk was even higher for people with a family history of psoriasis, indicating that genetics and diet can interact to further raise the risk. Being overweight explained part of the increased risk, as extra body fat can lead to more inflammation, but the link between UPFs and psoriasis persisted even after adjusting for body mass index (BMI) and markers of inflammation in the blood.

Why is this association important?

Psoriasis is a lifelong condition and is also linked to other health problems like psoriatic arthritis, heart disease, and depression. With UPFs making up a large part of many people's diets today, understanding their role as a modifiable risk factor is crucial.

The good news is that the study found even small dietary changes can make a difference. When people replaced a portion of their UPFs with more natural, unprocessed foods, such as fresh fruits, vegetables, nuts, or plain meats, their risk of psoriasis reduced. This suggests that it's not just about cutting out unhealthy foods, but also about adding more wholesome, nutrient-rich foods to the diet.

Practical implications

This research highlights the powerful connection between diet and skin health. For people with psoriasis, or those at increased risk due to family history, focusing on a diet rich in natural, minimally processed foods is a simple but effective step toward better skin and overall health. Even small changes, like swapping a sugary drink for water or choosing fresh fruit over packaged snacks, can reduce inflammation and lower the risk of psoriasis or its flare-ups.

Beyond psoriasis, reducing UPF intake is likely to benefit overall health, lowering the risk of obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and other inflammatory conditions.[3,4]

Conclusion

In summary, ultra-processed foods are strongly associated with a higher risk of developing psoriasis, largely because they promote inflammation and disrupt the immune system. The recent large study shows that this risk is significant and persists even after accounting for other factors. Since diet is something we can control, making healthier food choices by reducing UPFs and increasing natural, whole foods offers a hopeful and practical way to prevent or manage psoriasis and improve overall wellbeing.

References

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