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New Study: Ultra-Processed Food Manufacturers Are Applying Tobacco Industry Methods to Drive Overconsumption

Regulators should look to tobacco control for policies to manage ultra-processed food's impact on health

February 3, 2026—As the federal government and many states focus on addressing the role of ultra-processed foods, or UPFs, in driving the country's high chronic disease rates, a new *Milbank Quarterly* article looks at how the design, marketing, and distribution of ultra-processed foods mirror those of industrial tobacco products. The authors recommend that policymakers view UPFs not only as food but also as addictive, industrially engineered substances like tobacco—and that they consider successful tobacco control efforts as a model for regulating them.

The article explains how, similar to the way that cigarettes are engineered to deliver nicotine quickly and trigger cravings, UPFs:

- Deliver sugar and/or fats at doses high enough to maximize pleasure while minimizing aversive responses
- Accelerate the digestion of these sugars and fats by stripping fiber, protein, and water—and adding enzymes that help break them down quickly
- Create a rapid rise in blood sugar, followed by a swift drop
- Include extra ingredients for taste, smell, and texture to make the food more appealing, reduce feelings of fullness, and help it last longer on the shelf.

In addition, the packaging and wide availability of cigarettes (and now e-cigarettes) and UPFs make it easy to create a habit—one that is often marketed as healthy with labels like "low-tar" or "smoke-free," or "high protein" or "low fat."

“Some ultra-processed foods have crossed a line,” said author Ashley Gearhardt, PhD, Clinical Science Area Chair and Professor of Psychology at the University of Michigan. “Products like soda, sweets, and fast food are engineered less like food and more like cigarettes—optimized for craving, rapid intake, and repeated use. That level of harm demands regulatory action aimed at industry design and marketing, not individual willpower.”

Methodology

This review synthesizes findings from addiction science, nutrition, and public health history to identify structural and sensory features that increase the addictive potential of both cigarettes and UPFs. The authors focus on five key areas: dose optimization, delivery speed, hedonic engineering, environmental ubiquity, and deceptive reformulation.

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