

keeping up with CONSUMERS



Processed foods – the new evil? Sebastian Emig considers the latest fad to gain traction in the public health and nutrition debate

WHILE reading this piece are you nibbling on an apple? Maybe a piece of cheese? Or is it a few spoons of yoghurt? Have you ever thought of two of the above items being processed foods? No? Well there you have, in a nutshell, the latest fad that is gaining traction in the public health and nutrition debate.

By now, most of us know some basic rules of nutrition: maintain a moderate intake of foods that are high in fat, sugar and salt, major on fruit and vegetables and balance your proteins, carbohydrates and fatty acids. You might call it the ‘keep it balanced, stupid’ school of eating. However, the trend to split foods into camps – good and bad – is getting more popular.

It began in 2009 with a commentary published in *Public Health Nutrition* journal that challenged orthodox nutritional beliefs and caused waves in the public health community by suggesting that “the issue is not food, nor nutrients, so much as processing”. Now, after almost a decade of research analysing the eating habits of tens of thousands of people in over 20 countries, a team of Brazilian researchers claim they have amassed overwhelming evidence to support what they say should be the one golden rule of health and nutrition: “Avoid ultra-processed products”. This obviously resonates quite well with the years 2016–2025 being designated by the UN as the Decade of Nutrition, in support of the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Professor Carlos Monteiro and his colleagues in the department

of nutrition at the University of Sao Paulo, Brazil, have developed what they call the NOVA system, which puts all foods into four groups. Group one is “unprocessed or minimally processed foods”; group two is “processed culinary ingredients”; group three is “processed foods” and group four – to be avoided at all costs – is what they categorise as “ultra-processed food (UPF) and drink products”.

These UPF foods are defined as “industrial formulations typically with five or more and usually many ingredients, often including those also used in processed foods, such as sugar, oils, fats, salt, anti-oxidants, stabilisers, and preservatives”.

Ultra-processed products, says the NOVA group, have certain “common attributes”, such as “hyperpalatability” – which puts forward the idea that highly processed foods can be addictive – “sophisticated and attractive packaging, multi-media and other aggressive marketing to children and adolescents, health claims, high profitability, and branding and ownership by transnational corporations”. Crucially, the group also claims that they play a “role in the pandemics of diet-related non-communicable diseases”. Furthermore, the researchers say that “Because of their ingredients, ultra-processed products – such as packaged snacks, soft drinks, and instant noodles – are nutritionally unbalanced. As a result of their formulation and presentation, they tend to be consumed in excess, and displace natural or minimally

processed foods. Their means of production, distribution, marketing, and consumption damage culture, social life, and the environment.”

Perhaps you think this is already a bit much? Well in an article in *World Nutrition* in 2016, this group even goes so far as to speak of countries like the USA, Canada and the UK as “countries with less strong culinary traditions”. I am sure some of our readers would beg to differ.

To top it all, I would like to quote an article from the scientists’ group this year that concludes “that the ever-increasing production and consumption of these products is a world crisis, to be confronted, checked and reversed” and that “the ever-increasing production and consumption of ultra-processed food and drink products” can be considered as one of the human activities “disturbing natural planetary balance to an extent that may well become irreversible”.

However, some scientific channels have reservations about the group’s allegations. A commentary in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* in November claimed there was “no evidence” to support the NOVA view “that UPFs give rise to hyperpalatable foods associated with a quasi-addictive effect” and that data in the USA and Europe “fail to uphold the assertion that UPFs, which dominate energy intake, give rise to dietary patterns that are low in micronutrients”. Furthermore, “to perpetuate the myth that the modern approach to food classification is both static and outdated is both untrue and irresponsible”.

It will be interesting to see how this battle between the difference scientific schools of thought continues to play out, and which organisations for whom the NOVA system resonates (like WHO or OECD, for instance) might jump onto the bandwagon and promote it, not only for dietary advice but also in other ways such as supporting calls for discriminatory food taxation.

We, at the ESA, will continue to monitor developments and fight back against wrong and scientifically unfounded allegations. We will keep highlighting the tremendous work on food reformulations our members have done, as well as the very low intake of salt and saturated fats from savoury snacks in the average diet.

ESA EVENTS

Having just successfully finalised the production course 'Chips & Snacks: Formed products to end-of-line' in Malaga, Spain, with over 40 participants from over 17 countries, the ESA events team is now focusing on final preparations for SNACKEX in Barcelona, which will take place over 27-28 June 2019. At the time of writing, 98% of the stand space is

booked by more than 120 companies from more than 30 countries. This is a new record for our conference and trade show and we expect the highest turn-out of delegates, exhibitors and visitors since the event began. Book now to participate and become part of this memorable event.

REMINISCING AND OUTLOOK

Looking back at 2018, I would like to take this opportunity to thank all ESA members that strongly supported the Secretariat in crucial topics such as the regulation on acrylamide or the blanched peanut case, as well as further raising the profile and visibility of our sector vis-à-vis policy makers at events such as the European Parliament Summer evening or the 5th edition of the Share A Snack event.

Looking ahead, the next year will be full of challenges. We will likely see increased pressure concerning food reformulation, focussing on key nutrients for our sector, namely sodium and saturated fats. Furthermore, the issue of single use plastics and a potential burgeoning of discriminatory food taxes will also be on our plates.

With all this in mind our clear

message remains the same: sensible snacking! Consumed in moderation, savoury snacks and snack nuts can be part of a balanced diet. To further spread this important message, we have taken ownership of the hashtag #sensibleSnacking that is part of every tweet from our recently introduced twitter account. Please follow, like and retweet.

I would like to thank all the members personally for supporting the Secretariat this year and I think we can look with confidence to the future for our sector and the association.

All that remains is for me, on behalf of the entire ESA team, to wish you and your families all the very best for the festive season and for a happy and prosperous New Year. ■



Director General Sebastian Emig*
*in his capacity as permanent representative
of PrimeConsulting BXLBCN SL

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