

Don't be fooled: 10 truths about fake food

idec
instituto de defesa
de consumidores



Intro

Ultra-processed food products are those that have undergone multiple industrial processes before being sold and consumed. They contain specific food additives and ingredients not typically found in everyday home cooking, which are added to give them artificially appealing sensory characteristics and usually a long shelf life.

They have become increasingly present in the daily diet of a large part of the Brazilian population for several reasons, among them the fact that they are easy to find and often sold at low prices. However, the truth is that **consuming this type of 'food' is harmful to our health**, not to mention the other negative impacts on society and the environment.

And “food” in many quotation marks, because the ultra-processed food industry insists on calling them that and even claims they are healthy.

To support this lie, **large corporations in the industry play dirty**. They invest millions in advertising to make people believe in the questionable benefits of their products. They fund studies that praise and exaggerate certain characteristics of their products, linking them to supposed health benefits. They sponsor athletes and celebrities to create an illusion of health. They even support political agendas that favor their interests and block actions aimed at combating a problem that severely impacts public health.

But we are here to expose those lies! And not just that—we also defend our right to know what we eat and fight for regulatory measures and public policies that promote healthier and more sustainable eating habits in the country.

In this e-book, you'll discover 10 undeniable truths about 'pretend food.' Even if the industry claims otherwise, be aware—they are trying to deceive you!

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10.1 Natural food: The best and most economically viable option

Who is Idec

1

Ultra-processed food products are bad for your health, end of story



They go to great lengths to portray their products as healthy, nutritious, and essential at our table. However, there is a growing body of scientific evidence and publications from reputable universities and organizations that increasingly link **the consumption of these products to the development of chronic non-communicable diseases (NCDs)**, such as diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease, as well as obesity and even cancer.

One study, conducted by researchers from the Center for Epidemiological Research in Nutrition and Health at the University of São Paulo (Nupens/USP), the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (Fiocruz), and the National University of Chile, revealed that **57,000 deaths per year in Brazil** are attributed to the consumption of ultra-processed food products.

This estimate highlights that ultra-processed food products are more deadly than homicides!

This is because these products typically contain an excess of harmful ingredients, such as sodium, added sugars, and fats, along with food additives designed to enhance sensory characteristics like color, flavor, sweeteners, emulsifiers, and many others with nearly unpronounceable names.

Throughout this e-book, you'll discover the tactics the ultra-processed food industry uses to conceal this from consumers, and how you can break free from this harmful influence!



Consumption of ultra-processed food products is associated with 57,000 deaths per year in Brazil.

Stay informed!



10 Steps to healthy eating

To help promote proper and healthy eating, we have prepared this guide with recommendations from the Brazilian Dietary Guidelines. Inside, you will find 10 tips on practices that can be applied in your daily life.



2

The Brazilian Dietary Guidelines is a reliable source on healthy and sustainable eating

Brazilian Dietary Guidelines is an official document published by the Ministry of Health in 2014, offering recommendations for proper and healthy eating. To categorize foods and beverages, it relies on the **Nova system of food classification**, which divides foods into four groups based on processing methods: unprocessed or minimally processed foods, processed culinary ingredients, processed foods, and ultra-processed food products.

The guidelines advocate that unprocessed or minimally processed foods should form the foundation of our diet, and with the moderate use

of culinary ingredients, it's possible to create tasty, nutritious meals. The consumption of processed foods—natural foods with added salt, sugar, or other culinary ingredients—should be limited, and ultra-processed food products should be avoided altogether.

However, this vital document, which guides food and nutrition policies throughout Brazil, has repeatedly faced **attempts at discrediting its information** by the ultra-processed food industry. The influence of this industry is so pervasive that, in 2020, the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock (MAPA) requested a **revision** of the Dietary Guidelines, though this fortunately did not occur.

Stay informed!



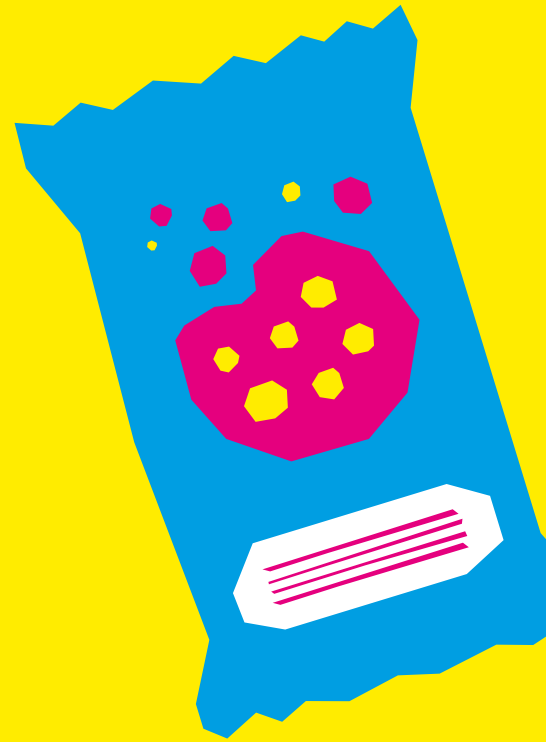
In defense of the Brazilian Dietary Guidelines!

The Guidelines are cited as a reference in important regulations, such as those on [healthy eating in schools](#), the [composition of the new basic food basket](#), and various other significant food policies across Brazil, including the National School Feeding Program ([PNAE](#)). Additionally, this guiding document serves as a framework for the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) and has inspired the development of dietary guidelines in countries like Argentina, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico, and Uruguay. For all these reasons, we must stand in defense of the Guidelines!



3

The ingredient list says a lot about the product



At Idec, we defend yours and our right to know what we're eating. We fight for regulations requiring the food industry to clearly disclose what is in its products and whether they pose health risks. This is why it is essential to **read package labels and understand product ingredients.**

Here's how it works: that tiny ingredient list is ordered by quantity, with the first item being the most abundant. **Avoid products where sugar, salt, or fat appear among the first ingredients.** By regulation, food additives are listed last, regardless of quantity.

Be wary of products with complex or unfamiliar ingredients. These are often substances not typically used in home cooking (e.g., glucose syrup, maltodextrin, protein isolates) or food additives (e.g., colorants, flavorings, sweeteners, emulsifiers), added by the ultra-processed food industry to enhance sensory appeal at low cost. It's better to leave these products on the shelf.

Labels with phrases like "high in fiber," "healthy," "fit," "additive-free," "organic," or "contains vitamins and minerals" are common ways to disguise ultra-processed food products. However, these claims don't guarantee that these products are healthy, as they may still contain other ingredients harmful to health.



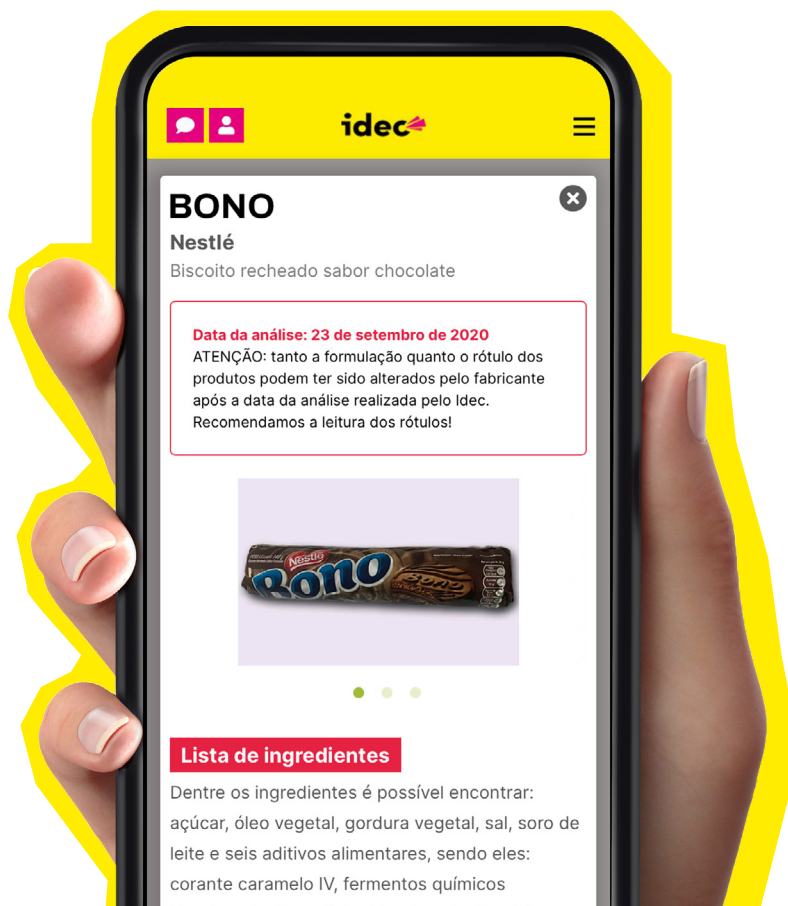
Beware!

Label X-Ray

Understanding and interpreting labels isn't always easy. That's why, in addition to advocating for better regulations—like clear indicators on the front of packaging to highlight high levels of harmful ingredients—we are dedicated to informing and guiding consumers. In this special section, we analyze various ultra-processed foods and provide recommendations for healthier alternatives.



[Check it all out!](#)



4

Reformulating an ultra-processed food products doesn't make it healthy



To avoid appearing harmful to health, it's very common for the ultra-processed food industry to **reformulate** its products and label them with claims like "high in fiber," "rich in vitamins," or "reduced sodium."

But here's a heads-up: changing specific ingredients in isolation doesn't make an ultra-processed product healthy. Fortifying and enriching foods with nutrients **does not provide the same benefits** as consuming foods that naturally contain those nutrients.

Worse yet, removing critical ingredients (like sodium, added sugars, and fats) is often accompanied by the **addition of other unhealthy substitutes**, such as rarely used culinary ingredients (e.g., maltodextrin, invert sugar, interesterified fat, isolated soy protein) and food additives (e.g., flavorings, colorants, sweeteners) that ensure appealing sensory qualities at a low production cost.

Stay informed!



Sweeteners: what they are and how to avoid them!

Commonly known as “sugar substitutes,” sweeteners are used to give food a sweet taste, partially or completely replacing sugar. However, they fall into the category of food additives typical of ultra-processed products. In 2023, the World Health Organization (WHO) issued guidelines recommending against their use for weight control and prevention of chronic non-communicable diseases (NCDs).



[Learn More!](#)



5



Frozen ultra-processed meals are not the same as homemade meals

Do you remember seeing in the frozen food section of the supermarket a lasagna or any other preparation labeled as having ‘homemade flavor’ or ‘homemade seasoning’?

With the advancement of food technology, the ultra-processed industry tries to create products that resemble homemade meals more and more, in addition to using advertising strategies to convince consumers of this and appealing to the practicality and convenience of these products.

However, these ready-made and frozen meals often contain a **large amount of health-harmful ingredients** (sodium, added sugars, and fats) and may also have food additives (such as flavorings, colorings, and sweeteners)

added during their production process. Not to mention that they encourage consumption in inappropriate places, like in front of screens, in the car, and in isolation, distorting the concept of communal eating presented in the Dietary Guidelines.

When we cook, we can choose the foods and seasonings we will include in the recipe, we know what they are, and we can adjust the quantity of ingredients. This is autonomy! Furthermore, homemade meals are **mainly made with fresh or minimally processed foods** and culinary ingredients, following the recommendations for a healthy diet and valuing food culture.

Stay informed!



Tá na Mesa (It's Served): Information on healthy and sustainable eating

Eating well is important, but we know that this habit is hindered by the ultra-processed industry. If you want to receive tips and recipes to avoid frozen ultra-processed foods, find information for healthy meals, and follow our discussions about what lies behind what we eat, sign up for our newsletter! It's free and arrives in your email every Wednesday.



[Subscribe to Tá na Mesa \(It's Served\)!](#)



6

Ultra-processed food products harm food culture



The food cultures of each location contain specificities and have a **strong relationship with the characteristics of the territory** where they are situated. They utilize regional foods, respect seasonality, and encourage local producers and family farming.

Moreover, the act of cooking promotes the consumption of fresh and minimally processed foods and has the ability to transmit knowledge, preserve traditions, and thus maintain the cultural identity of a people expressed through food.

On the other hand, with the consumption of ultra-processed foods, the opposite occurs. Since the basis of these foods is commodities like wheat, corn, and soy, the diet becomes increasingly monotonous. Moreover, ultra-processing distances the final product from the

origin of the food, making it more and more difficult to identify what that product is made of.

The Brazilian Dietary Guidelines reinforce the importance of food culture. After all, to achieve a truly healthy diet, one must also consider the social, cultural, economic, and environmental impacts that foods produce.



The act of cooking promotes the consumption of *fresh foods*

Stay informed!



Ebook Regional Brazilian Cuisines

Discover, value, and appreciate the culinary formation of our country with this ebook made by us! Inside, you will find curiosities, characteristics, and dishes from some of the main food cultures of Brazil, such as the caipira (rustic Brazilian cuisine), sertaneja (from the Brazilian hinterlands), pantaneira (from the Pantanal wetlands), caiçara (south coastal Brazilian cuisine), nortista (from North of Brazil), and açoriana (Azorean).



[Download it for free!](#)



7



Ultra-processed products contain pesticides, making them even worse

One of the claims made by the ultra-processed industry about its products is that they do not contain pesticides, unlike fresh or minimally processed foods, which would be directly exposed to these toxins. Besides reinforcing a completely misguided stigma that what comes from the countryside is not suitable for consumption, **this claim has been debunked by us!**

With two volumes published so far, '[Tem Veneno Nesse Pacote \(There's Poison in This Package\)](#)' is a groundbreaking study that analyzed various categories of the most consumed ultra-processed products, including those of animal origin, and **detected the presence of pesticide residues in a large portion of them.**

Among the contaminated products are: chicken nuggets, cream cheese, hamburgers, sausages, soy-based

drinks, mini bread rolls, water and salt crackers, and filled cookies.

We highlighted, for the first time, a double danger: in addition to causing chronic health problems, ultra-processed food products also contain harmful toxins, such as glyphosate, which is considered 'probably carcinogenic' to humans by the WHO.



Stay informed!



Myths and truths about pesticides

Does washing eliminate pesticides? Is it harmful to health? So how can you have a crop without them? You can find answers to these and other questions in our ebook, which objectively clarifies the biggest doubts about pesticides. But we'll give you a heads up: they are indeed harmful to health!

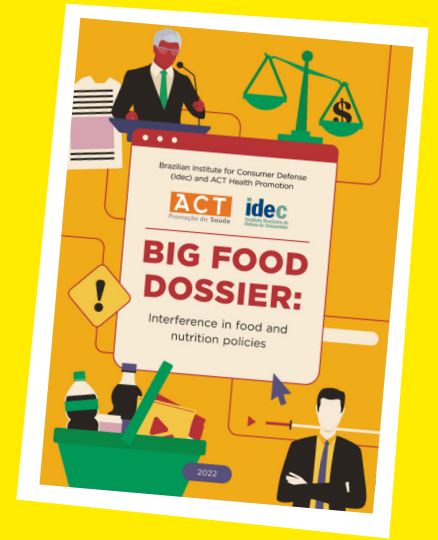


[Download it for free.](#)



8

The ultra-processed food industry influences public policies to protect its business interests



Although evidence shows the benefits for the population of a diet based on fresh or minimally processed foods, there are still challenges in advancing public policies that promote healthy eating. There are no shortages of proposals and committed individuals in this regard, such as our project [‘Alimentando Políticas \(Feeding Policies\)’](#).

But large corporations that manufacture food products use strategies to

‘undermine, block, or delay efforts to develop, implement, and improve public policies,’ as demonstrated in our [‘Big Food Dossier,’](#) which analyzes eight cases of industry interference in food policies and suggests solutions for dealing with conflicts of interest.

With the participation and involvement of political allies, lawyers, public agents, and even scientists, the industry reaches other levels of influence.

Stay informed!



Big Food also in documentary

The Dossier analyzes the corporate political activities of the industry case by case. In this documentary, we reveal the power that these ultra-processed food and beverage corporations concentrate through testimonies from experts that will leave you astonished.



[Watch it!](#)



Stay informed!



They wanted to postpone the implementation of the front-of-package warning labels...

...but we didn't allow it! The new front-of-package nutrition labeling regulation requires manufacturers to alert consumers about excessive added sugars, sodium, and saturated fat in their products. This was a fight of ours and other organizations for many years, which the industry tried everything to prevent. One day before the regulation was set to take effect for most products, they attempted to extend the deadline.

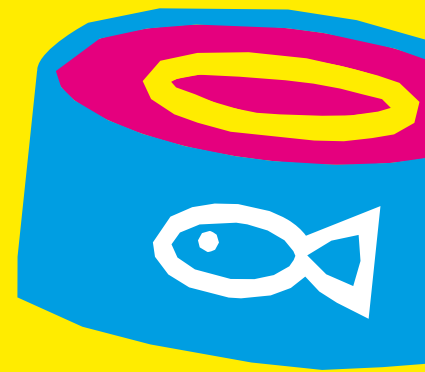


[Read the article](#)



9

“Industrialized” and “ultra-processed” are not the same thing



Not all industrialized or packaged foods are necessarily ultra-processed and harmful to health. The ultra-processed industry distorts the concept of ‘ultra-processed’ by using the terms ‘processed’ and ‘industrialized’ as synonyms. Therefore, the Nova classification of foods, on which the Dietary Guidelines are based to categorize foods, helps us identify the level of processing that makes a food or drink ultra-processed, allowing us to avoid it.

Fresh foods, such as rice, beans, fruits, vegetables, and legumes, which should be the basis of our diet, can undergo processes like cleaning, freezing,

portioning, and pasteurization, among others, which are not harmful to health. Thus, they are classified as **minimally processed**.

There are also processed foods, which are fresh or minimally processed foods added with salt, sugar, and/or fat, such as canned vegetables, fruits in syrup, canned sardines and tuna, some breads, and cheeses, among others. The processing techniques for these foods resemble culinary techniques, but the addition of these ingredients alters the composition of the food, so they are recommended to be consumed in moderation.

Stay informed!

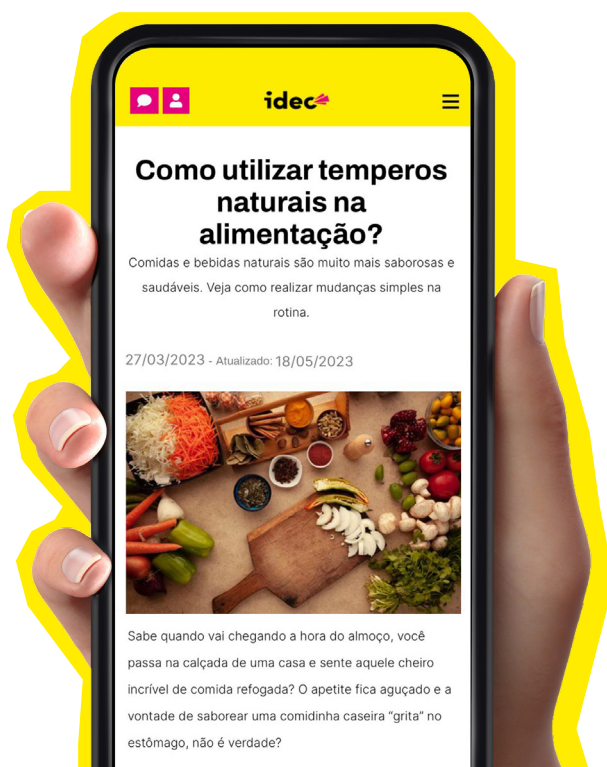


How to use natural spices in your diet?

Nothing beats the smell of food being prepared! But to be authentic, it should be garlic, onion, black pepper, parsley, cilantro, rosemary, bay leaf, ginger, turmeric, chili, cumin, peppermint, or wild thyme... Ready-made spices in powder, paste, or tablet form are ultra-processed and contain high amounts of sodium and food additives. Check out tips for adding aroma and flavor to your meals with natural spices.



[I want that!](#)



10

Enforcing laws and regulations on ultra-processed products will not cause economic harm



Here at Idec, just as in the food area, we also have a front that advocates for health rights where we say: **profit is not above our health!**

But that's not how the ultra-processed industry sees it. To prevent regulatory measures that promote healthy foods and reduce the privileges of products harmful to health, the industry uses the argument that this will impact sector profits, leading to unemployment and economic losses for the country.

In addition to the fact that these changes are extremely necessary and bring benefits, this argument falls apart when we look at the public policy on front-of-package nutrition labeling that was implemented in Chile.

The country was a global pioneer in 2016 by adopting an octagonal warning

label model for ultra-processed foods and beverages on packaging. A few years later, studies demonstrated the initiative's progress: research published in [The Lancet in 2021](#) showed a significant reduction in the consumption of products carrying these warnings among Chileans (23.8% fewer high-calorie products, 36.7% fewer high-sodium products, and 26.7% fewer high-sugar products). Another study published in [Nutrients in 2022](#) found that this reduction did not negatively impact the food industry. Similar findings were seen in [Brazilian research](#), showing that an increase in the price of sugary drinks discourages their consumption and promotes substitution with healthier beverages such as water, coffee, and milk.

10.1

Natural food: The best and most economically viable option



The Brazilian tax policy has favored ultra-processed foods since the 1970s, combined with intense advertising for these types of products, contributing to a problematic common belief that they need to be present in meals, as in ‘what else can one eat without them?’ or even ‘what will the poorer people eat if they don’t have ultra-processed foods?’

In some states, for example, instant noodles are **taxed at the same rate** of the Goods and Services Tax (ICMS) as rice and beans. The Industrialized Products Tax (IPI) on soft drinks and chocolate products is almost zero, similar to that of mineral water. Some ultra-processed foods, such as sausages, cookies, and margarine, also receive tax exemptions because they are considered part of the **basic food basket** in some Brazilian states.

In addition to such tax incentives, there is a chain of **benefits from the cultivation of monocultures**, such as soy, corn, and wheat, which are the basis for many ultra-processed products manufactured by the industry. The **tax exemption in the soybean production chain** is almost double

the estimated tax exemption for the entire basic food basket, calculated at R\$ 30 billion, highlighting that our tax policy is highly beneficial for ultra-processed foods.

The ones who plant the foods that actually reach the tables of Brazilians for a healthy diet are **small rural producers**. According to the latest census conducted by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), about **70% of the beans, 34% of the rice, and 87% of the national cassava** are **produced by family farming**.

What we need is to **encourage and strengthen the consumption of healthy foods** like these and, as a consequence, stimulate sustainable agriculture, agroecology, and the local economy. This reality is possible and advocated by us and many other organizations and social movements. **To learn more and how to support this cause, follow Idec’s work!**

Stay informed!



Organic markets map

Want to know where to find organic and agroecological foods without toxins, sourced from small producers and family farming near you? Then use Idec's Organic Markets Map, a tool to connect buyers with sellers. There are over a thousand registered initiatives across the country.

 [Discover it!](#)



Ebook created by Idec ♥

We are an independent organization that works to defend and promote the rights and interests of consumers. We denounce abuses, pressure authorities, and participate in the creation of laws and public policies in pursuit of fair, healthy, and sustainable consumer relations in various areas, including food.

And that's not all. In addition to this work, we also focus on providing important information to raise awareness and empower the population about the rights we have and the changes we need.

That's why, if you liked this material, lend a hand so our work can reach further!

You can share our content with your network and even become a member of Idec to contribute to our fight.

See the benefits of joining us and how to associate:

idec.org.br/associe-se-alimentos



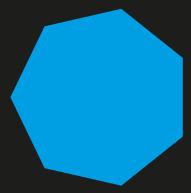
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