

Ultraprocessed Foods: Public Opinion Research
Key Findings
The American Heart Association with The Harris Poll

Background

The American Heart Association is seeking to better understand consumer knowledge and perceptions of ultraprocessed foods, as well as foods that are not ultraprocessed, to inform conversations around food-labeling practices.

Research Method

This survey was conducted online in the United States by The Harris Poll on behalf of the American Heart Association from June 16 - 18, 2026 among 2,007 adults age 18 and older (referred to as “consumers” throughout).

Data are weighted, where necessary by age by gender, race/ethnicity, region, education, marital status, household size, household income and political party affiliation to bring them in line with their actual proportions in the population. Respondents for this survey were selected from among those who have agreed to participate in Harris Poll surveys.

The sampling precision of Harris online polls is measured by using a Bayesian credible interval. For this study, the sample data is accurate to within ± 2.7 percentage points using a 95% confidence level. This credible interval will be wider among subsets of the surveyed population of interest.

All sample surveys and polls, whether or not they use probability sampling, are subject to other multiple sources of error which are most often not possible to quantify or estimate, including, but not limited to coverage error, error associated with nonresponse, error associated with question wording and response options and post-survey weighting and adjustments.

Sample Breakdown			
Gender		Household Income	
Female	51%	Less than \$50,000	23%
Male	49%	\$50,000 - \$99,999	26%
Generations		\$100,000 - \$124,999	11%
Gen Z (ages 18–29)	20%	\$125,000 - \$149,999	8%
Millennial (ages 30–45)	28%	\$150,000 - \$199,999	12%
Gen X (ages 46–61)	25%	\$200,000 - \$249,999	10%
Baby Boomers (ages 62–80)	25%	\$250,000 or more	10%
Political Party Affiliation		Highest Level of Education	
Republican	32%	High school or less	37%
Independent + Other	28%	Some college	26%
Democrat	39%	College graduate or more	36%
Total Sample N=2,007 100%			

Key Findings

1. General awareness of ultraprocessed foods is widespread, but deeper familiarity remains limited, signaling a need for guidance.
 - The majority (90%) of consumers have at least heard the term “ultraprocessed foods,” but only just over a third (35%) report they are very or extremely familiar with ultraprocessed foods.
 - *And yet, seven in ten (72%)* feel confident identifying whether a food is ultraprocessed or not, but only 25% are very confident.
 - Nearly two-thirds (64%) feel at least somewhat confident identifying whether a beverage is ultraprocessed or not, but fewer than a quarter (23%) are very confident.
 - Two-thirds (66%) feel confident that they can explain what it means for a food to be ultraprocessed to someone else, *but* only one in five (22%) feel very confident doing so.

Signal Implication: Ultraprocessed foods have entered the public conversation, but deeper understanding has not kept pace with awareness. Consumers may be comfortable discussing ultraprocessed foods, but confidence is often shallow. This increases the likelihood that partial or inaccurate interpretations are shared and reinforced among peers. (Q3, Q4, Q5)

2. Processing labels strongly influence perceptions of health and purchasing behavior.
 - Three-quarters (76%) of consumers believe foods labeled as “ultraprocessed” are unhealthy.
 - Three in five (62%) believe foods labeled as “not ultraprocessed” are healthy.
 - Seven in ten (71%) report trying to avoid ultraprocessed foods
 - Majority of consumers are concerned about high levels of added sugar (80%), sodium (79%) and saturated fat (78%) in their foods, roughly a third of whom are very concerned (37%, 35%, 34% respectively).

Signal Implication: If labeling is anchored solely on processing, consumers will interpret ‘not ultraprocessed’ as ‘healthy’ but concerns are also rooted in nutritional outcomes rather than processing alone. This suggests that discussion of ultraprocessed food may be most effective when connected directly to the nutrients and health risks consumers already understand. (Q6 and Q7)

3. Consumers do not view processing as a simple continuum.
 - Majorities (83%) agree whole foods are always better than processed foods.
 - Only just over half (57%) agree there are no ultraprocessed foods that could also be considered healthy.
 - A similar proportion (54%) agree processed foods are always better than ultraprocessed foods.
 - Half (51%) agree some processed foods are better than whole foods.

Signal Implication: Consumers generally favor less processed foods but acknowledge exceptions and tradeoffs. This suggests the public may be more open to nuance than the broader narrative assumes. (Q8)

4. Consumers' definitions of ultraprocessed foods are rooted in artificiality, while “not ultraprocessed” signals naturalness and simplicity.
 - When asked to describe what makes a food ultraprocessed, 38% link ultraprocessed foods with artificial additives, chemicals, dyes or unpronounceable ingredients; 23% associate UPFs with heavy industrial processing or major alteration from the food’s natural state; 15% associate UPFs with high levels of sugar, salt or fat or generally unhealthy / low nutrition “junk food.”
 - When asked to describe what makes a food “not ultraprocessed,” 26% associate “not ultraprocessed” with natural or all-natural ingredients; 22% describe these foods as fresh, raw or farm-to-table, garden-to-table or straight from the source; 20% define them as free from additives, preservatives, artificial ingredients, dyes or chemicals; 19% associate them with minimal processing or as foods close to their original / natural state.

Signal Implication: Consumers view processing through a simple “artificial vs. natural” lens. Ultraprocessed foods are defined by additives and industrial manufacturing, while “not ultraprocessed” serves as shorthand for fresh, natural and minimally altered foods. As a result, consumers may rely more on perceived naturalness than on a standardized understanding of processing when evaluating food healthfulness. (Q1 and Q2)

5. The public trusts health nonprofits as a source of information on the categorization of UPFs.
 - Majorities (87%) trust their health provider and 78% trust health nonprofits to categorize foods as either whole, processed or ultraprocessed.
 - Fewer than half (45%) trust the federal government, while one in five (22%) do not trust the federal government at all for labeling guidance on UPFs.

Signal Implication: Consumers will rely heavily on organizations like the American Heart Association to interpret these nutritional definitions—so it’s critical that what we put forward fully reflects health risk. (Q9)