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GLOBAL FAST FOOD CONSUMPTION AND ITS IMPACT ON HEALTH: *A NARRATIVE REVIEW OF CONSUMPTION TRENDS, NUTRITION, AND HEALTH OUTCOMES*

MUSARRAT FIDA
Nursing Instructor, CIMS Nursing College (CNC), Multan, Pakistan.
EMAIL: *musarratishfaq@gmail.com*
KAINAT
BScN Student, Department of English, CIMS Nursing College CNC Multan, Pakistan. ***EMAIL:*** *drmjamil78@gmail.com*
NIDA
BScN Student, Department of English, CIMS Nursing College CNC Multan, Pakistan. ***EMAIL****: umar03019483040@gmail.com*
AYESHA KHALID
BScN Student, Department of English, CIMS Nursing College CNC Multan, Pakistan. ***EMAIL****: kp3250978@gmail.com*

Abstract
Today, fast food is an important part of the global food landscape. Highly processed foods (sugar-sweetened beverages, processed sandwiches, French fries, pizza, fried chicken, and burgers) are widely available across high-income and LMIC countries. Changes in dietary behaviour have been influenced by urbanisation, new working patterns, convenience, aggressive marketing, food delivery services, and portion sizes and affordability. Whilst the occasional intake of fast food can fit within a balanced diet, regular intake may be associated with greater consumption of calorie-rich foods containing high levels of saturated fats, free sugars and refined carbohydrates and sodium. These eating habits have been linked to overweight, obesity and some cardiometabolic health outcomes. In 2022, WHO estimated that there were 2.5 billion adults affected by overweight or obesity, including approximately 890 million who had obesity, while more than 390 million children and adolescents between 5 and 19 years of age were classified as overweight.
The role of the growth of fast-food consumption in the global population is examined, as well as the nutritional properties, health effects, vulnerable groups, social and environmental influences, and strategies for fast-food prevention.
Keywords: *fast food, global consumption, ultra-processed food, obesity, cardiovascular disease and diabetes, nutrition and public health.*

1. Introduction

The world food environment has evolved significantly in the last few decades, although food is a critical enabler of health. Many communities combine traditional home-cooked foods with commercial foods, packaged foods, and ready-to-eat foods. One of the most appealing features of fast food is that it is convenient and requires minimal preparation, and it's often not very expensive. Fast food has not been designated as one of the scientific food categories, and not every fast food meal is the same in its nutritional profile. But many foods that are sold are high in energy and also have high levels of saturated fat, free sugars, and sodium. But it is not just about having the occasional burger or pizza; it is about the repeated dietary pattern of fast food displacing foods that provide substantial nutritional value, including vegetables, fruits, legumes, and whole-grain foods.

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WHO regards obesity as a chronic relapsing disease which is caused by a combination of factors such as genetics, eating behaviours, food availability, market forces, and the environment. The present burden of obesity highlights the relevance of the diet environment becoming a public-health concern.

2. Objectives

1. To explain how the consumption of fast food has grown and become popular around the world.
2. To investigate the nutrition of popular fast foods.
3. To examine the relationship between frequent consumption of fast food or ultra-processed foods and major health outcomes.
4. To take into account the impact on children, young people and other vulnerable groups.
5. To identify strategies at the individual level, community level and policy level which will be feasible for better food choices.

3. World Consumption and World Food Consumption Trends

With food markets becoming globalized, many more commercial foods are now available in different regions of the world. There are also large restaurants and local fast food shops, and supermarkets, convenience stores, and delivery apps are available as well. Urban conditions, such as long working hours, commuting, and lack of time for cooking meals, can lead people to opt for ready-to-eat meals.

Marketing is another consideration of influence. Television and outdoor advertising, mobile applications, social media, and promotional discounts are some of the methods used to promote fast-food products. Attractive branding, characters, influencers and peers can have a special impact on children and adolescents. These influences take place in a broader food context in which unhealthy food choices might be more affordable, more accessible and more obvious than healthy food choices.

Fast food is not the only reason for overweight and obesity to be a growing problem worldwide. Other factors include physical inactivity, sleep habits, socioeconomic variables, genetics, medications, stress, and other dietary factors. However, one of the factors contributing to this more recent nutrition transition is that energy-dense and highly processed food is now available.

4. The Nutritional Value of Fast Food

A lot of fast food items are prepared to be very appetizing. A typical meal is a refined carbohydrate, fried foods, processed meat, cheese, sauces, and a sugar-sweetened beverage. These can combine to provide a lot of energy with less fibre, vitamins and minerals.

- High energy density and large amounts of food.
- Many foods like fried foods, processed foods and restaurant foods contain a lot of sodium.
- Some fried foods, processed meat and cheese-containing foods are high in saturated fats.
- Eliminate all free sugar in sweetened beverages, desserts and sauces.
- Highly processed grains and other foods high in rapidly digested carbohydrates.
- Many meal combinations and lower dietary fibre and lower fruit and vegetable content.

WHO has recommended a healthy dietary pattern that is based on dietary diversity of minimally processed and unprocessed foods. It suggests a maximum of 10% free sugars in total energy intake for everyday use in the diet and less than 5 g of salt per day for adults.

5. Food Safety and the Evidence Base

There is a distinction between the terms fast food and ultra-processed food. Ultra-processed foods are diverse and consist of many packaged items, including some fast food, sweetened drinks,

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instant food and ready-to-eat food. Thus, research results on ultra-processed food do not automatically equate with the role played by all fast foods as a cause of disease.

A 2024 umbrella review in the BMJ synthesized evidence from 45 pooled analyses encompassing approximately 9.9 million participants. Its findings indicated that greater exposure to ultra-processed foods was associated with a higher likelihood of obesity, type 2 diabetes, and death from cardiovascular causes, along with several other adverse health outcomes. Importantly, the authors also reported there was significant variation in the certainty of evidence across outcomes and that the methodological quality of the analyses was considered to be low or very low. The results of this study thus underscore the need for concern about high exposure, but should be interpreted with caution and not as evidence for a singular causal trajectory.

6. Overweight and Obesity Effects

Overweight and obesity are one of the more apparent health effects of unhealthy eating habits. Fast food can be a high-energy meal, especially if paired with fries, desserts and sugar-sweetened drinks. It can be hard to achieve a proper energy balance in the presence of frequent consumption. WHO estimates indicate that, in 2022, approximately 2.5 billion adults were classified as overweight, while more than 890 million of them were living with obesity. This year, 43% of adults are overweight, and around 16% of adults are suffering from obesity. According to WHO, the proportion of adults affected by obesity has increased to more than twice its previous level since 1990, and it is expected to increase further.

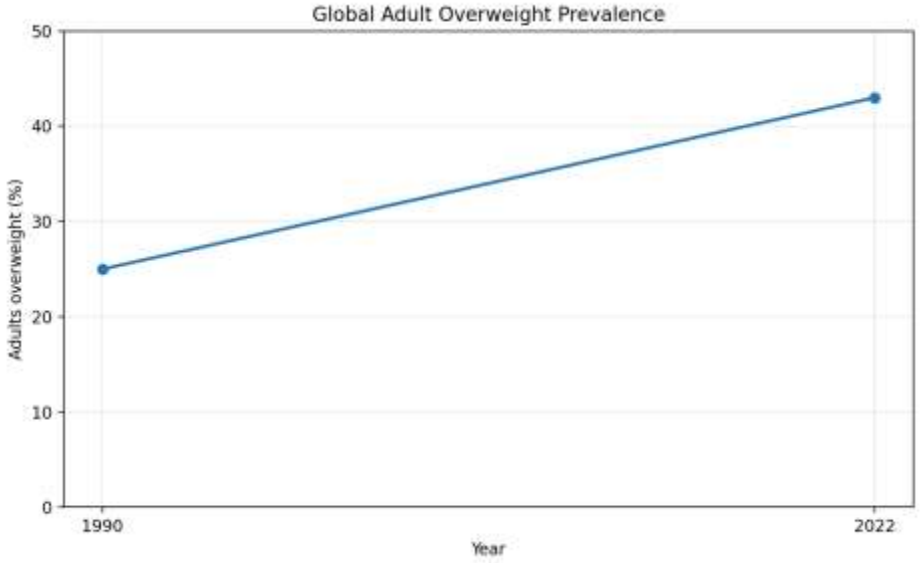


Figure 1. Adult overweight prevalence (2022 vs 1990) worldwide. Source: WHO.

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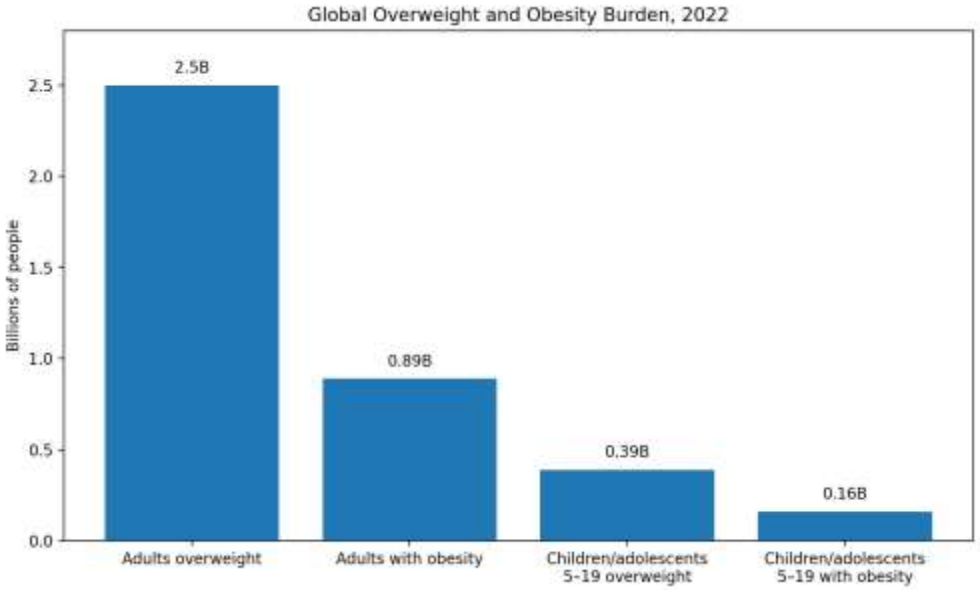


Figure 2. Selected global overweight and obesity estimates for 2022. Source: WHO.

7. Cardiovascular Health

Diet and lifestyle play a significant role in cardiovascular diseases. A high-sodium diet raises blood pressure, and a diet rich in saturated fat has a negative effect on blood cholesterol and triglyceride levels. Therefore, frequent consumption of fried and processed foods may reflect an overall dietary pattern that is less supportive of cardiovascular health. The BMJ umbrella review identified that cardiovascular outcomes, such as death from cardiovascular disease, were associated with higher exposures to UFDs. But cardiovascular risk is multi-factorial – the role of fast food should be seen as one element of a pattern of diet and lifestyle.

8. Type 2 Diabetes and Metabolic Function

Type 2 diabetes is caused by complicated factors such as genetic predisposition, body weight, physical activity, diet and other factors. Excessive intake of calorie-dense foods and sugar-sweetened beverages has the potential to cause excess energy intake, weight gain, and elevated metabolic risk.

The 2024 BMJ umbrella review found convincing evidence for a relationship between increased exposure to UPF and incident T2D; however, the authors noted that there was some variation in the quality of evidence. These results highlight the need to improve overall diet quality and not just that of one component food.

9. The Impact on Children and Young People

Children and adolescents are an important population as eating behaviors and food preferences can be developed at an early age. The environment of the food industry (including fast food marketing), the school food culture and peer influence, as well as digital marketing, can influence preferences for highly palatable foods.

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WHO reports that excess weight affects more than 390 million individuals between 5 and 19 years of age, including approximately 160 million who are living with obesity. Overweight in childhood has implications for physical health, psychosocial health and the risk for chronic disease in the future.

- Schools have the opportunity to promote water, fruits and vegetables and well-balanced meals.
- Parents/carers can demonstrate healthy eating habits at home.
- Children can learn basic nutrition and labelling skills.
- Effective policy measures can help limit children's and adults' exposure to food marketing that promotes products containing excessive amounts of salt, free sugars, and unhealthy fats.

10. Mental and Social Dimensions

Social and psychological factors are also related to food choice. Eating fast food can often be connected with social encounters, ease, and solace. In parallel, consuming an unhealthy diet and obesity can be associated with stigma and poor quality of life. This is why focusing on individual accountability in public-health communication is inappropriate, and a focus on the food environment, income, education, availability, and time is appropriate.

Findings from the BMJ umbrella review indicated that greater exposure to ultra-processed foods was associated with an elevated likelihood of adverse mental health outcomes, particularly anxiety and depression. Much of the evidence underlying these findings is observational – so these results should be considered as associations rather than causation between processed food and mental illnesses.

11. Socio-economic and Environmental Factors

Knowledge is only one of the factors that can influence healthy eating. Factors such as cost, food availability, work schedules, transportation, cooking facilities, and local food environments can affect what is available for choice. It might be more convenient for some communities to get a fast food meal than a balanced meal or fresh produce.

Therefore, public-health strategies should focus on both the demand-side and the supply-side. Nutrition education should go hand-in-hand with actions that increase the availability, affordability, and visibility of healthful foods.

12. Prevention Strategies

12.1 The Individual or Family Level

- Minimize fast foods; don't eat them every day.
- When dining at establishments other than the home, select smaller amounts.
- Drink water or sugar-free drinks rather than sugar-sweetened drinks.
- Include vegetables, fruit, beans and/or whole grains in meals as appropriate.
- Read nutrition labels and make comparisons for sodium, saturated fat and sugar.
- Make some meals at home before so that there will be less of a need for take-out food.

12.2 School and Community Level

- Deliver hands-on nutrition education information, not just facts.
- Increase the supply of healthy foods in schools, colleges, and in the workplace.
- Promote availability of clean drinking water.
- Develop community activities to support physical activity.
- Encourage youth and families to learn healthy cooking practices.
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12.3 Policy Level

- Improve nutrition labelling and information.
- Discuss strategies to minimise exposure to marketing of unhealthy foods for children.
- Increase the supply of low-cost fruits, vegetables and other nutrient-rich foods.
- Implement population-based interventions to lower excess intakes of salt and free sugars.
- Initiate and/or support research on the effectiveness of food-environment interventions.

13. Discussion

As fast food consumption has become an epidemic around the world, it is a complex public-health issue. Fast food is easy to obtain and is a normal and necessary part of social and economic life; guidelines that must be the total elimination of fast food might be impractical for some. A more practical one is to cut down on regular exposure and make the diet pattern more nutritious.

The current evidence is worrying about ultra-processed diets, but caution should be taken in interpreting the evidence. The BMJ umbrella review was large and had associations for a large number of outcomes, but much of the evidence was observational, and there were some outcomes with low or very low certainty. Thus, future studies are needed to help understand how food becomes the problem, the most harmful food traits, and the effectiveness of the interventions in various cultural and economic contexts.

For nursing and health care providers, the issue offers a chance to do preventative health education. Nurses can check food consumption patterns, determine risk factors that can be modified, deliver culturally responsive counselling, promote good nutrition, weight management, and stress the need for long-term lifestyle changes.

14. Guidelines for Health Care Professionals

1. In health assessments, ask patients about how often they eat fast food and sugar-sweetened beverages.
2. Give short and simple dietary guidelines that are relevant to the person and their culture.
3. Communicate non-judgmentally and motivate when talking about food choice.
4. Don't set too strict guidelines for diet changes.
5. Monitor weight, blood pressure and other appropriate risk factors, as needed.
6. Refer patients for dietetic support if further specialist nutritional support is needed.
7. Educate parents/caregivers in addition to children and adolescents about nutrition.

15. Conclusion

The convenience, urbanisation, marketing, and the expanding delivery systems and the changes in lifestyles have increased the importance of fast food in the global food environment. Poor dietary habits include energy-dense, highly processed foods, which are often high in calories, and may contribute to excess body weight, obesity, and a range of cardiometabolic health conditions. The impact is significant on a global scale: According to WHO estimates, approximately 2.5 billion adults were living with overweight in 2022, including around 890 million individuals affected by obesity.

It doesn't mean that all fast food is bad, but it does mean that you should think twice about eating junk food every day. Rather, the emphasis should be on frequency, the size of portions, overall dietary pattern, and the food environment. Personal choices can be put in place, and choices can be made easier and more affordable by schools, health professionals, communities, food businesses, and governments. A combined approach is the best chance to lower the long-term health impact of poor eating habits.

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