

Winter Conference 2022/23, 24–25 January 2023, Architecture of food: processing, structure and health

Ultra-processed foods and pregnancy: A qualitative exploration of awareness and use of these products in the UK and Ireland

F. Lavelle^{1,2,3}, C. McKernan^{2,3}, C.A Martins^{4,5}, V. Shrewsbury^{6,7}, J.A Wolfson^{8–10},
R.M Taylor⁶, K. Duncanson^{11,12}, C.E Collins^{6,7} and C. Elliott^{2,3}

¹Department of Nutritional Sciences, School of Life Course & Population Sciences, King's College London, London UK,

²Institute for Global Food Security, Queen's University Belfast, Belfast, UK,

³School of Biological Sciences, Queen's University Belfast, Belfast, UK,

⁴Center for Epidemiological Research in Nutrition and Health, University of Sao Paulo, Sao Paulo, Brazil,

⁵Institute of Food and Nutrition, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Macaé, RJ, Brazil,

⁶School of Health Sciences, College of Health, Medicine and Wellbeing, The University of Newcastle, Callaghan, NSW 2308, Australia,

⁷Hunter Medical Research Institute, New Lambton Heights, Australia,

⁸Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Department of International Health, Baltimore, MD, USA,

⁹Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Department of Health Policy and Management, Baltimore, MD, USA,

¹⁰University of Michigan School of Public Health Department of Health Management and Policy, Ann Arbor, MI, USA,

¹¹School of Environmental and Life Sciences, College of Engineering, Science and Environment, The University of Newcastle, Callaghan, Australia and

¹²School of Medicine and Public Health, College of Health Medicine and Wellbeing, The University of Newcastle, Callaghan, Australia.

Societal consumption and meal preparation patterns have changed due to a number of factors such as time scarcity. This has led to a decrease in home cooking and an increase in the consumption of convenience and ultra-processed food products⁽¹⁾. Ultra-processed foods are associated with low nutritional dietary quality, obesity and other chronic non-communicable diseases⁽²⁾. Within pregnancy, they are associated with increased gestational weight gain and neonatal body fat⁽³⁾. However, research in the area tends to be cross-sectional and in North and South America. Additionally, the classification of food products is commonly conducted by researchers. Therefore, it is essential to explore awareness of ultra-processed products, their usage and perceived role in the diet as well as perceptions around their influence on health. In particular, this research aimed to understand this during pregnancy in European participants.

Online focus group discussions with pregnant women and those who have experienced pregnancy in the UK and ROI were conducted between February and April 2022. The two-part semi-structured topic guide was based on previous research conducted in Brazil, the USA and Australia. Ethical Approval was received from Queen's University Belfast. The discussions were recorded and transcribed verbatim. An inductive thematic analysis will be conducted by two researchers (FL, CMK), preliminary findings are presented.

Thirteen focus groups were conducted with ROI and UK participants (n = 52). The preliminary findings indicate that participants see a role for convenience foods within their diet, however, that there is a need for 'balance.' There was very little awareness of the term ultra-processed food. Additionally, participants were shocked that some products they would have considered 'healthy' such as some vegetarian products, were ultra-processed foods. There was a mixture of reactions among participants with some participants believing they would be more conscious about these products moving forward. However, others have an acceptance that the products have a role in the diet. Time, cost and education were all indicated as contributors to their use.

This research highlights that there is a limited understanding of what ultra-processed products are in the UK and ROI. Further education around these products could enable informed choices around product use.

Acknowledgments

The Authors would like to thank the respondents who participated in the research and are grateful to the Association for Commonwealth Universities for funding this research.

References

1. Monteiro CA, Moubarac JC, Cannon G *et al.* (2013) *Obes Rev* **14**, 21–28.
2. Mendonca RDD, Pimenta AM, Gea A *et al.* (2016) *Am J Clin Nutr* **104**, 1433–1440.
3. Zhang C & Ning Y (2011) *Am J Clin Nutr* **94**, 1975–1979.