

Bliss, Ultraprocessed foods and me. A consumer's conundrum.

September 2026

Each bite of this Kit Kat I'm eating leaves me wanting more. My response to it is typical of responses to Ultraprocessed Foods (UPFs). I've recently come across the term in the context of health risks associated with them and want to take a further look. What are they, why do food manufacturers like them, how widespread are they in our daily food, what are the health issues associated with them, what are the alternatives?

While I answer these questions, I'll keep eating the Kit Kat and use it as an example. For those unfamiliar with them, Kit Kats describe themselves as 'Crisp Wafer Fingers Covered with Smooth Milk Chocolate'.

What are UPFs?

Foods these days are classified under the NOVA system. The system is based on how and why food products undergo industrial processing before being purchased or consumed. It assumes that the extent and purpose of processing to which food is subjected determines its nutrient content and other attributes.¹

NOVA Group 1 includes unprocessed or minimally processed foods, such as whole grains, fruits, vegetables, and fresh meats with no or minimal alterations.

NOVA Group 2 foods include processed culinary ingredients, comprising substances extracted from foods, such as oils, sugars, and salt, used for cooking.

NOVA Group 3 are processed foods that undergo some processing, such as cheese, canned vegetables, and baked goods.

NOVA Group 4 are industrial formulations typically made from five or more ingredients, including substances not commonly used in domestic kitchens ... They are designed to be hyper-palatable, convenient, attractive, and highly profitable, often replacing healthy prepared foods. ... The hallmark of ultra processed foods is the presence of ingredients you would not find in a residential kitchen. These include high fructose corn syrup, hydrogenated or interesterified oils, protein isolates (soy protein isolates, whey protein concentrate), emulsifiers (soy lecithin, carrageenan, mono- and diglycerides), flavour enhancers (monosodium glutamate, artificial flavours), colourings (Red 40, Yellow 5, caramel colour), and non-sugar sweeteners (aspartame, sucralose, acesulfame), potassium.²

The ingredients of the Kit Kat are:

Sugar, vegetable fat, emulsifier, soy lecithin, full cream milk powder, wheat flour, more emulsifiers, cocoa, raising agent, sodium bicarbonate, salt, yeast, whey powder, white chocolate, wafer fingers, Rainforest Alliance Certified cocoa.

So, the Kit Kat is definitely an UPF.

¹ Food Classification NOVA, UPENS USP 12 September 2026

² NOVA Food Classification System Explained, Ultra Processed Food List

Hyper-palatability is achieved by determining the bliss point of a UPF. The bliss point is the “just right” concentration of sugar, salt, or fat where a food tastes most pleasurable before becoming too intense.

The Kit Kat I am eating is certainly pleasurable.

Why are they produced?

The industrial intent behind the production of UPFs is to create products that are hyper-palatable, cost-effective, and designed for overconsumption. They also provide scalability, high shelf life, cost efficiency, and consumer appeal.³

Producing Kit Kats is cost efficient.

Raw material: Kit Kat uses cocoa, sugar, milk, and wafer as primary ingredients, with costs varying according to market fluctuations.

Production costs: Nestle’s investment in automated production facilities allows it to maintain a lower per-unit cost.

Economies of scale: Nestle/s global presence enables the company to reduce costs by producing Kit Kat in large volumes.⁴

These qualities make Kit Kat highly profitable. The estimated global revenue of Kit Kat is around \$4.1 billion.⁵

They also make Kit Kats scalable.

The ingredients in Kit Kat give it good shelf life.

The longevity of Kit Kats is influenced by the ingredients, primarily sugar, and chocolate, which act as preservatives and extend the products shelf-life. If stored in a cool, dry place away from sunlight and any longevity and strong odors that might affect its flavour ... Kit Kats are often good to use 6 to 12 months past their best before date.⁶

How widespread in Australia are UPFs?

Nearly two in three packaged foods in Australia are UPFs.⁷ They include:

- Soft drinks and energy drinks
- Packaged chips, crackers and cookies
- Instant noodles and soups
- Chicken nuggets and fish sticks
- Sweetened breakfast cereals
- Reconstituted meat products (hot dogs)
- Candy and confectionary
- Frozen meals with long ingredients lists

³ Sidharthan, Dr. Chinta, How Ultra-Processed Foods Are Made: Inside the Industry of Engineered Eating, News Medical Net 2026

⁴ Managerial Economics Firm Analysis of Kit Kat by Nestle, Course Hero, 2025

⁵ Flavour 365, Analyzing the Top-Earning Nestlé Candy Brand, 2025

⁶ How Long Does Kit Kat Last. Unwrapping the Shelf Life Secrets, Texas Real Food, 2026

⁷ Ferguson, Adele, Duped: Food Fraud, Four Corners, ABC 2026

What are the health effects of UPFs?

It is rare for people to drop dead holding the incriminating packaging, but there is no longer any serious doubt that consuming a diet of ultra-processed foods (UPFs) risks a catalogue of life-shortening illnesses from heart disease and stroke to diabetes and cancer. Because these diseases are degenerative over time, the food and drink industry has been able to argue for decades that its UPFs are fine in moderation. It would have us believe that there is no such thing as a “junk” individual food, only poor diets overall, and that its products therefore should not be subject to any restrictions.⁸

A recent New Scientist magazine carried an article about research linking Ultraprocessed foods with depression, anxiety, and even dementia.⁹

By optimizing the seasoning levels to hit the bliss point, food companies can create products that are not only more appealing to consumers but also more addictive.¹⁰

Sugar operates to release dopamine in the area of the brain that makes things rewarding. The more sugar the greater the feeling of reward. So great is it that it leads a person to seek more, addictive behaviour.

UPFs are manufactured to be softer and easier to digest. This can reduce the feeling of satiation which may lead over-eating. They have additives and lower levels of fibre which can lead to a less sustained fullness.¹¹

What are the alternatives?

UPFs are shelf stable, unlike fresh produce. They save time, effort, and mental energy while cooking. Most importantly, they are more affordable. UPFs cost US 55 cents per 100 calories, compared with US\$1.45 for unprocessed foods. Time consideration, accessibility, and affordability—these are really big barriers to being able to consume less ultra-processed foods ... Ultra-processed foods are so widely consumed because they fill a need.¹²

There are suggestions about how to minimise eating UPFs at the individual and family level.

- Keep lots of healthy foods at home and try not to purchase UPFs when at the grocery store.
- Try preparing meals at home in advance that use less processed foods.
- Read the nutrition labels and ingredient lists on products before you buy them, looking for foods that have only a few pronounceable, recognizable ingredients.
- Try replacing an ultra-processed food with fruit or vegetables. Use minimally processed frozen or canned options if fresh fruit or vegetables aren't available.

⁸ Lawrence, Felicity, Why are ultra-processed food firms panicking and suing? Because they know time is running out, The Guardian, 78 August 2026

⁹ Thomson, Helen, Food for Thought, New Scientist 8 August 2026 p. 18

¹⁰ Martinez, Leon, The Bliss Point: Unveiling the Genius Behind the Ultimate Taste Sensation, Home Dining Kitchen, 8 July 2026

¹¹ Coulson, Morgan, Most of the Foods We Eat Are Ultra-Processed. Are They All Unhealthy? Bloomberg Scholl of Public Health 2025

¹² Coulson, Morgan, Most of the Foods We Eat Are Ultra-Processed. Are They All Unhealthy? Bloomberg Scholl of Public Health 2025

- Replace sugary beverages with water.
- Choose whole grains, like whole wheat bread, over processed grains like white bread.
- Make a homemade version of a processed food, like sweet potato chips, healthy muffins, bread, or salad dressings.
- Choose healthier menu options when eating out, like salmon with steamed vegetables instead of a hamburger.¹³

Okay, I don't have to eat Kit Kats.

However, arguably, the problem cannot be left entirely to individual actions.

In 2024, the Department of Health, Disability and Ageing outlined its initiatives in the area of Nutrition Policy to help people make healthy food choices.

- The voluntary Health Star Rating (HRS) system rates the nutritional value of packaged foods from half a star to 5 stars. This enables us to quickly compare similar foods – the more stars, the healthier the food.
- Through the Healthy Food Partnership, we work with the food industry and the public health sector to make healthier food choices easier and more accessible.
- The Healthy Food Partnership Reformulation Program aims to reduce the amount of sugar, sodium and saturated fat in processed and manufactured foods.
- Eat for Health contains the Australian Dietary Guidelines, tips and advice on eating healthy, and resources to help people make healthy food choices.
- Nutrient Reference Values recommends the level of nutrients we need to be healthy, based on scientific evidence.¹⁴

Kit Kat has a 0.5 Health Star Rating. I really should stop eating Kit Kats.

HRS system is not without its critics. Professor Mark Laurence, former Board member Food Standards Australia and New Zealand was interviewed on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) Four Corners program Duped: Food Fraud. Laurence said:

The food standards are excellent world class for food safety concerns but when the issue is about more chronic problems like diabetes, heart disease and soon the policy settings and the risk assessment are not adequate, not fit for purpose for ultra-processed foods sweets, snacks, soft drinks.¹⁵

In 2024 the Australian Food and Grocery Council supported systemic and personal means.

Broad and sweeping regulation would likely increase costs for manufacturers and consumers alike with minimal impact on the health of the Australian community. Through food and beverage product development and reformulation, portion control measures, food labelling and collaborations with government, food and beverage manufacturers have demonstrated their readiness and ability to act and look forward to continuing this engagement.¹⁶

¹³ Coulson 2025

¹⁴ What we're doing about food and nutrition, Department of Health, Disability and Ageing, 2024

¹⁵ Laurence, Mark, Duped: Food Fraud, Four Corners, ABC 2026

¹⁶ AFGC Statement on ultra-processed food, 21 June 2024

The Kit Kat wrapper says that 1 bar of it is equivalent to 1 serving. That is, when I eat my Kit Kat all in the one go, I have swallowed 4 servings. The Kit Kat is looking worse and worse.

In 2026 the Coalition for Better Health published Ultra-Processed Food Policy in Australia: Closing the Gap. In summary it said:

Ultra-processed food policy in Australia sits at an inflection point. The scientific evidence base established by NOVA classification research, the demonstrated effectiveness of mandatory labelling and marketing restriction in Chile and the United Kingdom, and the continuing upward

The trajectory of obesity and metabolic disease prevalence in Australia together constitute a compelling case for regulatory reform.

The current voluntary framework (a self-selected labelling system, industry-administered marketing codes, and no fiscal measures) is not commensurate with the scale of the problem. Moving to mandatory HSR (Health Star Rating) with a processing dimension, statutory marketing restrictions, an SSB (Sugar Sweetened Beverage) levy, and mandatory procurement standards for public institutions would bring Australia's food regulatory framework into alignment with the evidence and with the practice of peer nations.¹⁷

What this all means

Ultraprocessed Foods are unlikely to leave the market place any time soon. They are much too profitable. In the absence of strong government intervention, the associated health issues will continue.

The question for Australian policymakers is not whether the evidence supports action. It is whether the political will exists to act on it.¹⁸

¹⁷ Ultra-Processed Food Policy in Australia: Closing the Gap, Coalition for Better Health, 2026

¹⁸ Coalition for Better Health, 2026