

The HEALTH



ASEAN'S BLUEPRINT FOR RESILIENCE

The ASEAN Plus Three Summit in Kuala Lumpur prioritised regional health resilience, proposing a shared medical stockpile and reaffirming unity to strengthen preparedness, inclusivity, and future crisis response across East Asia **p08-09**

Fair health financing

There is growing dissent within healthcare community regarding TPAs, with claims they interfere with doctors' professional duties. **- P10**

Healing beyond the scar

Gentle, guided shoulder exercises soon after surgery can stop frozen shoulder from developing and preserve flexibility. **- P15**

Universal health unfulfilled

Despite advancements in health service coverage since 2000, significant gaps remain for the poorest populations. **- P16-17**

TheTeam

Kay Mathy | Publisher
kaymathy@revonmedia.com

Law Beng Chee | Chief Executive Officer
bclaw@revonmedia.com

EDITORIAL ADVISORY BOARD

- ▶ **Dato' Dr Mohmed Razip Hassan**
- ▶ **Dato' Fauzi Omar**
- ▶ **Prof Dr Yumi Zuharis Has-Yun Hashim**
- ▶ **Adi Satria**

EDITORIAL DEPARTMENT

Dato' (Dr) Johnson Fernandez | Managing Editor
johnson@revonmedia.com

Khirtini K Kumaran | Editor
khirtini@revonmedia.com

Sheila Rozario | Contributing Editor
sheila@revonmedia.com

Fatihah Manaf | Writer
fatihah@revonmedia.com

Adeline Anthony Alphonso | Writer
adeline@revonmedia.com

Zafirah Zafruddin | Writer
zafirah@revonmedia.com

a.azam | Creative Director
a.azam@revonmedia.com

Isvarya Panielselvam | Graphic Designer
isvarya@revonmedia.com

SALES & MARKETING DEPARTMENT

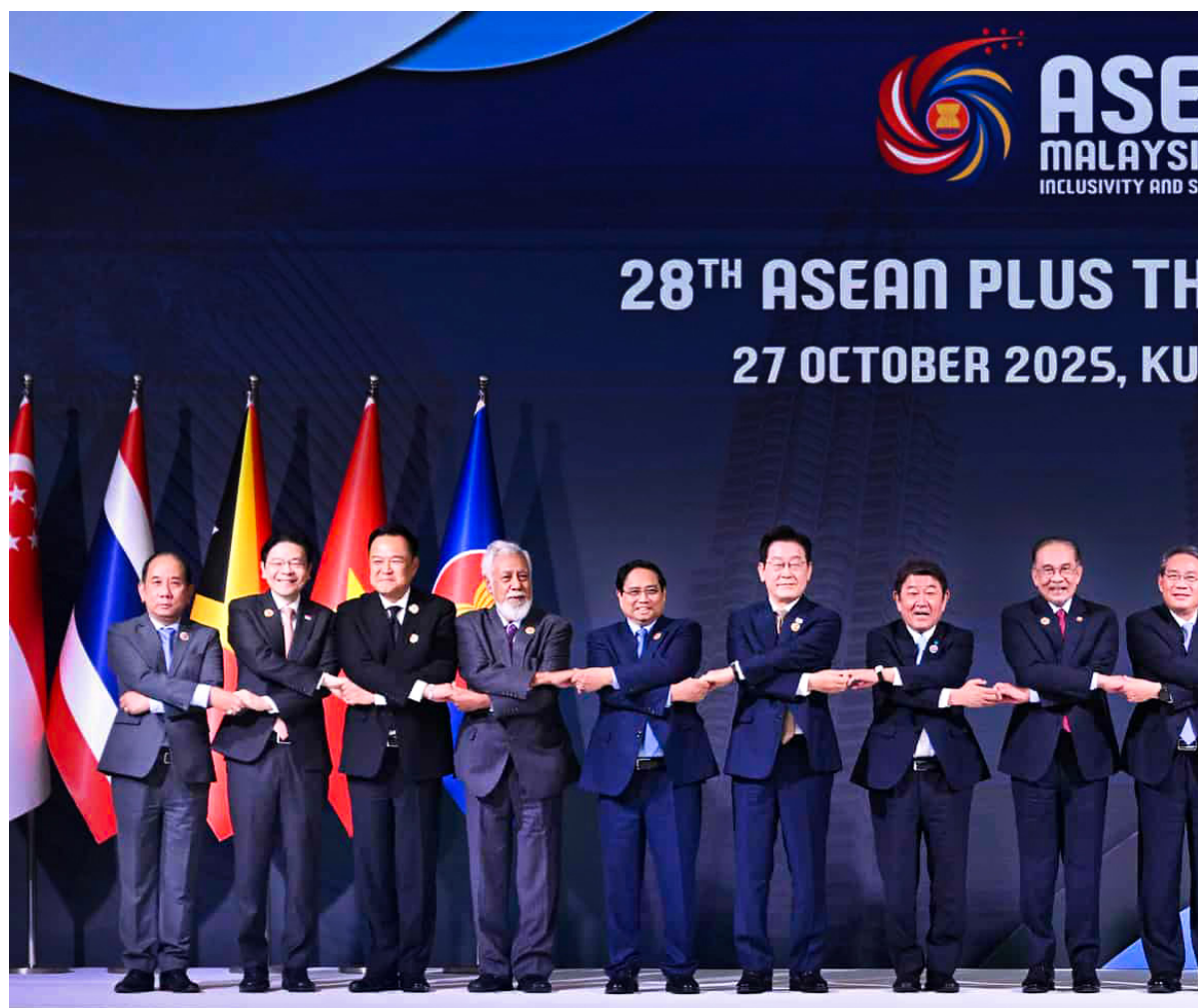
Sahana | Media Director
sahana@revonmedia.com

Hash Plus Media | Media Associate
marketing@hashplusmedia.com

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Jalan SS 7/26, SS 7,
47301 Petaling Jaya,
Selangor D.E., Malaysia.
Tel: +603 7886 6091

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No. 16, Jalan IDA 1A,
Industri Desa Aman, Kepong,
52200 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
Tel: +603 6279 9474
+6 03 6263 1856
Fax: +603 6280 6802

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Healing together

The APT Summit reinforced the commitment to enhancing regional cooperation across sectors, especially in health



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Fair health financing

There is growing dissent within healthcare community regarding TPAs, with claims they interfere with doctors' professional duties

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Celebrating World Sight Day

Vision, J&J (Malaysia)'s WSD celebration featured engaging presentations and workshops focused on eye health and contact lenses



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Fashion with function

Contact lenses are medical devices that require proper fitting from an eye care practitioner to ensure safety and comfort

P15

Healing beyond the scar

Gentle, guided shoulder exercises soon after surgery can stop frozen shoulder from developing and preserve flexibility

SMART PARTNERSHIP



Hidden cost of convenience

- Ultra-processed foods (UPFs) may be cheap, tasty, and time-saving. Still, their high levels of sugar, salt, unhealthy fats, and additives contribute to chronic diseases, including obesity, diabetes, hypertension, and cancer.
- Unlike minimally processed items such as frozen vegetables or canned beans, UPFs are industrial formulations designed for flavour, shelf life, and appeal - often at the expense of nutritional quality.
- Islamic principles, such as *toyyib*, emphasise foods that nourish and benefit the body. Choosing less-processed, nutrient-dense foods supports long-term wellbeing while aligning with healthier, more mindful eating practices.



NUR AZIRA TUKIRAN

International Institute for Halal Research and Training (INHART), International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM)



RABIATUL ADAWIYAH ROSLAN

Academy of Contemporary Islamic Studies (ACIS), Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM)

IN this thriving modern world, the demand for food products has grown alongside the increasing human population. Most people need ready-to-eat food products that can simplify their daily routine, especially when they are too busy.

As technology advances and demand for food products rapidly increases, a revolution in food science and modern grocery shopping has led to a dramatic rise in the production and consumption of ultra-processed foods (UPFs). But what exactly are UPFs?

UPFs are “industrial formulations typically containing five or more ingredients, which usually include substances not commonly used in home cooking, such as preservatives, emulsifiers, colourings, flavourings, and other additives designed to enhance shelf life, flavour, and appearance” (Gibney, 2018).

These foods are often high in sugar, salt, and unhealthy fats, and undergo multiple

processing steps before reaching consumers.

CONVENIENT BUT ‘COSTLY’

The popularity of UPFs began in high-income countries and is currently spreading to countries of all income levels. Consequently, UPFs are widely chosen in modern diets due to their convenience, affordability, accessibility, and longer shelf life.

Ultra-processed foods are convenient for individuals with hectic lifestyles, as they are ready-to-eat and require minimal preparation. This ease of use significantly saves time. Many food manufacturers also compete to produce UPF products and engage in aggressive marketing.

Nevertheless, although UPFs seem convenient and affordable, they are “costly” in terms of health, as their widespread and frequent consumption hurts global health trends, contributing to rising rates of diabetes, obesity, cancer, and other related diseases.

ENGINEERED FOR TASTE

Ultra-processed food (UPF) is very different from “processed food”. Processing means changing food from its natural form, like freezing or adding flavourings. Most of what we eat is processed in some way, like canned beans or packaged snacks.

But UPFs are different. They are not just altered but are produced from a combination of industrial ingredients and additives designed to enhance shelf life, texture, and taste. UPFs are often cheap and heavily advertised, but they are not great for health. They contain high levels of sugar, fat, and salt, which can cause health problems.

Food scientists created a NOVA classification system to group foods and drinks based on how much they have been processed and why (Monteiro et al., 2019). It is like putting foods into different categories based on how much they have been changed and why they were changed. This helps us understand what we are eating and how it might affect our health (Table 1).

Table 1. NOVA Food Classification (Source: UNC Global Food Research Program, 2021)

GROUP 1	GROUP 2	GROUP 3	GROUP 4
Unprocessed/ minimally processed	Processed culinary ingredients	Processed foods	Ultra-processed foods
<p>Foods unaltered or altered by processes such as removing inedible parts, drying, grinding, cooking, pasteurisation, freezing, or non-alcoholic fermentation.</p> <p>» No substances are added.</p> <p>» Processing aims to increase food stability and enable easier or more diverse preparation</p>	<p>» Substances obtained directly from Group 1 foods or from nature, created by industrial processes such as pressing, centrifuging, refining, extracting or mining.</p> <p>» Processing aims to create products to be used in the preparation, seasoning and cooking of Group 1 foods.</p>	<p>» Products made by adding edible substances from Group 2 to Group 1 foods using preservation methods such as non-alcoholic fermentation, canning, or bottling.</p> <p>» Processing aims to increase the stability and durability of Group 1 foods and to make them more enjoyable.</p>	<p>» Formulations of low-cost substances derived from Group 1 foods with little to no whole foods; always contain edible substances not used in the home kitchens (e.g., protein isolates) and/or cosmetic additives (e.g., flavours, colours, emulsifiers).</p> <p>» Processing involves multiple steps and industries and aims to create products liable to replace all other NOVA groups</p>
<p>Examples: Fresh or frozen fruits/vegetables, pulses, packaged grains, flours, nuts, plain pasta, pasteurised milk, chilled/frozen meat</p>	<p>Examples: Butter, vegetable oils, other fats, sugar, molasses, honey, salt</p>	<p>Examples: Canned vegetables in brine, freshly made bread or cheeses, cured meats</p>	<p>Examples: Packaged snacks, cookies/ biscuits, instant soups/ noodles, ready-to-eat/ heat meals, candy, soft drinks</p>

BUT CONVENIENT “COSTLY” UPF AND THE HIDDEN COST OF CONVENIENCE

Why do people choose UPFs?

Convenient . Easy. Tasty .
Long shelf life

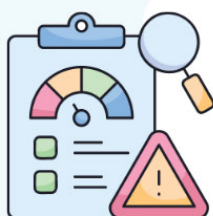


What are Ultra-Processed Foods (UPFs)?

UPFs are industrial formulations with multiple ingredients, including additives like preservatives, emulsifiers, colourings, and flavourings.

Examples?

Instant noodles, snack bars, flavoured drinks, frozen meals.



- Nutritional Deficiencies: High in calories but low in essential vitamins, fibre, and minerals.
- Health Issues: Linked to obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, cancer, and metabolic disorders.

Wholesome Eating

- Choose less processed, nutrient-rich foods.
- Read labels (watch sugar, salt, additives).
- Add whole foods: fruits, nuts, veggies.
- Balanced meals over convenience meals.



**ELEVATE YOUR PLATE.
CHOOSE WHOLESOME, NUTRISHING FOODS!**

HIDDEN RISKS

Ultra-processed foods (UPFs) are crafted to be enticing and convenient, but their hidden risks are not always apparent. Among these risks are nutritional deficiencies, allergic reactions, cancer risks, obesity, metabolic disorders, and cardiovascular diseases.

The problem lies in the nature of UPFs; they often have a high-calorie content but are deficient in essential vitamins, fibre, and minerals. This imbalance can lead to nutritional deficits despite a high-calorie intake. One significant concern is the high salt content in UPFs.

For example, a study by Tan et al. (2019) found that varieties of instant noodles in Malaysia contain an average of 4.3 grams of salt per 100 grams, nearly four times the level considered high in Malaysia (>1.2 grams per 100 grams).

Similarly, research by Zainal Arifen et al. (2021) on fast food in Malaysia revealed that sauce products contained the highest salt content (1.9 grams per 100 grams), followed by bread and potato-based items. In Malaysia, where traditional diets are rich in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, the shift towards UPFs is particularly concerning.

This shift is detrimental, especially to children and older adults, who require nutrient-dense diets for growth and maintaining health. While these foods provide a quick source of energy, their lack of essential nutrients poses significant health risks.

WHOLESOME EATING

Ultra-processed foods have become a global norm, shaping diets across diverse communities worldwide. Their convenience and affordability make them appealing across cultures, but this widespread acceptance often masks a deeper concern about whether these foods truly support wellbeing.

Across many traditions, including Islamic teachings, there is an emphasis on consuming foods that are not only permissible but also good, wholesome, and beneficial. This idea is reflected in the concept of *toyyib*, which highlights nourishment, quality, and healthfulness. The Quran reminds us:

“O mankind, eat from whatever is on earth what is lawful and good (*toyyib*)...”
(Quran, Al-Baqarah 2:168).

This verse underscores a universal principle: food should strengthen and benefit the body, not merely satisfy hunger or offer convenience. Many ultra-processed foods fall short of the wholesome eating principle when they contain high levels of sugar, sodium, additives, preservatives, flavour enhancers, and artificial ingredients.

In today's globalised food system, it is essential to encourage consumers to look beyond packaging and marketing, and to choose foods that support long-term health, vitality, and balance. It serves as a reminder that the best foods are not only convenient but also genuinely good for the body, mind, and overall well-being.

Ultra-processed foods make life easier, but they come with hidden health consequences. Their long-term impact from nutrient deficiencies to chronic diseases becomes clearer as global research continues to grow.

While convenience is valuable, it should not overshadow what truly nourishes us. By understanding UPFs and making mindful choices, individuals can enjoy balance, health, and well-being without losing the practicality of modern living. - **The HEALTH**

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