

Ultra-processed foods are causing losses of 10% of UK G...

Published: January 13, 2026, 9:03 am

I suspect that there are those who have been wondering why I have made so many comments about the costs of ultra-processed food recently. I have not, after all, become a dietary expert, and I will never pretend to be so, although I am more than capable of reading what those who have such expertise say and of acting on it.

Instead, my concern has been about the economic consequences of these disastrous ultra-processed products that are called food, but very rarely, in my opinion, meet the technical criteria for being so because far from meeting our craving for something to fulfil our need for nutrition, they are designed to perpetuate that craving, inducing addictive behaviour as a consequence.

Now, the Guardian has highlighted a new report from an academic whose work I have long admired, Prof Tim Jackson at the University of Surrey:

The UK's growing addiction to unhealthy food costs £268bn a year, far outstripping the budget for the whole [NHS](#), the first research into the subject has found.

The increased consumption of foods high in fat, salt and sugar or which have been highly processed is having a “devastating” impact on human health and Britain’s finances.

“Far from keeping us well, our current food system, with its undue deference to what is known colloquially as ‘big food’, is making us sick. The costs of trying to manage that sickness are rapidly becoming unpayable,” [the Food, Farming and Countryside Commission \(FFCC\) report](#) says.

The cost breakdown includes spending by the NHS (£67.5bn), social care services (£14.3bn) and the welfare system (£10.1bn) on tackling the diseases closely linked to diet, such as type 2 diabetes, heart problems and kidney disease. The other £176bn is the indirect cost of lost productivity from people who are too sick to work due to diet-related illness (£116.4bn) and “human costs”, such as pain and early death (£60bn).

There will, of course, be some uncertainties about these numbers. They are estimates and are bound to be figures within ranges, but the scale of this cost is staggering, and these indications are likely to be reliable within the ranges indicated.

What becomes clear as a result is that ultra-processed food is actually imposing costs on the UK economy, amounting to approximately 10% of our supposed national income.

In the NHS, almost exactly a third of the total cost of healthcare in this country is spent dealing with the consequences of the consumption of ultra-processed food.

I would also add that it is entirely appropriate that included in this cost is the misery that these foods create as a consequence of the harm that they cause. Incapacity, limited life opportunities, disease and early death are all massively punitive on those who suffer them. All are avoidable if ultra-processed food production was ended.

I do, of course, recognise that a significant change in government spending patterns is required to make this happen. People will need higher incomes to manage better, or should I say, proper foods. But, the point is very obvious and is that the savings would more than pay for such costs.

So the question is whether Wes Streeting will take any notice, or will he want to continue dispensing almost wholly unnecessary medications to those with obesity and other conditions so that they can continue consuming deeply harmful ultra-processed foods? The choice is his to make, but in terms of the economy and in terms of health only one option makes any sense. I suspect, in that case, that he will opt for the wrong alternative.