Societal Effects of UPFs

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Recently, our global culture has been gaining more popularity. Ranging from technology to trade, many fields have been impacted. One of these areas is often overlooked - food. As crucial as it is, food has been dramatically altered globally. Large food conglomerates have advertised relentlessly - to the point where “junk” food has become omnipresent in our lives. Fast food companies have opened stores around the world, making unhealthy food the go-to for many. Though this food may seem delicious, junk food actually has a number of detrimental effects on our society, global and national.

To begin with, unhealthy, ultra-processed foods pose many health risks for our society. As a whole, many diseases such as obesity, type 2 diabetes, heart disease, as well as mental health damage occur due to increased consumption of junk food. Many developed nations have large obese populations - even in children, shortening lifespans. This greatly impacts public health, creating a less healthy population. Furthermore, these harmful foods create a dent in the economy as well. Workers feel less productive and more lazy, with estimates that undernutrition and obesity cost 5% of global GDP. Moreover, increased hospital trips, medicines, and weight loss drugs lead to monetary loss as well. Many companies make a profit selling drugs and therapies, rather than addressing the issue at its roots.

Likewise, ultra-processed food also poses a great risk to cultures and local traditions. Due to absurdly high amounts of money spent, many local cuisines have to compete. Many people gain a preference for junk food as well, and neglect the cuisine of their heritage. For example, many urban citizens of Rajasthan often prefer to consume fast food due to convenience rather than dishes such as Ker Sangri or Kachri Ki Sabzi. Social isolation and loneliness, moreover, occur because of lower self-esteem and obesity. Equally important are the inequalities perpetuated by unhealthy foods. In lower-income communities, healthful foods are often less affordable in comparison to junk foods. This leads to higher consumption and more health problems for lower-income communities, often historically marginalized. In Pacific Island nations, colonialism, small populations, and genetic factors have all led to the world’s highest obesity rates due to the main food sources being pre-packaged and ultra-processed, showing the deleterious effects on developing nations.

All in all, UPFs (ultra-processed foods) have an excess of detriments for our society. Varying from lower life expectancies and economic productivity to loneliness, loss of heritage and inequality, junk food obviously does more harm than good. Although our global culture has been responsible for the proliferation of UPFs, our societies can learn to avoid these harmful foods and instead use our global culture for good. Curious chefs and connoisseurs can learn about healthy, traditional dishes from around the world, thus creating a happier, healthier global society.