

Are We Too Busy to Chew?

Finding time to prepare a nutritious meal is a luxury many working adults simply do not have. Between long office hours, commuting, and personal responsibilities, the thought of chopping vegetables or marinating chicken can feel exhausting. For years, the standard solution to this daily time crunch was ordering fast food or heating up a frozen microwave dinner. Today, a growing number of health-conscious consumers are turning to an entirely different alternative. They are choosing to drink their meals instead of eating them.

The roots of the category go back further than most people realize. Protein supplements have existed in fitness communities since at least the 1950s, when weightlifters and gym promoters began selling powders made from soy, wheat germ, and similar ingredients through trade magazines. For decades the products stayed largely within that niche, associated with muscle-building rather than everyday eating. What changed was the story told around them.

That story got its most memorable chapter in 2013, when a software engineer in San Francisco decided that food was a problem worth solving. Rob Rhinehart created a drinkable formula he called Soylent, a nod to a 1970s science fiction film, and argued that cooking and eating were inefficiencies he no longer had time for. The pitch landed perfectly in Silicon Valley, where skipping lunch to keep coding was already considered a reasonable lifestyle choice. It allowed ambitious founders and coders to stay chained to their desks, treating meals as an annoying interruption rather than a basic human experience. Investment followed quickly, and Soylent became a cultural symbol: the logical endpoint of a productivity obsession that had spread from the office into every corner of daily life.

The company's trajectory since then has been considerably less triumphant. Customer illness complaints and a product recall in 2016 damaged its reputation, leadership rotated through repeatedly, and after being acquired by a consumer goods company in 2023, Soylent now reports declining revenue. Rhinehart himself has largely stepped away from public life, reportedly raising goats on a rural property, which feels like either a punchline or a correction depending on your perspective.

What Soylent did, however, was open a door that other companies were eager to walk through. Today, the market is dominated by brands that promise health and vitality rather than just mechanical work efficiency. Huel, a British company that entered the American market in 2017, sells shakes, powders, and dehydrated meals positioned around wellness and active living. The financial numbers reflect a massive shift in consumer habits. Huel reported close to \$290 million in annual revenue in 2024, and American retail sales grew by more than 300 percent after its products reached Costco and Target. Ka'Chava charges premium prices for bags of heavily marketed nutritional powder, around \$70 each. Liquid+, a newer brand packaging blended vegetables into portable pouches, went viral on social media and surpassed \$100,000 in monthly sales by late 2025. The broader market is projected to reach \$7 billion by 2035.

The reasons people reach for these products are rarely ideological. Most customers are not trying to eliminate eating as a concept. They are tired, busy, and looking for something that removes one more daily decision. Parents managing school runs and work calls describe the appeal in terms of mental load. Shift workers and students often frame it as a practical solution to a practical problem, something better than vending machine snacks or skipping food altogether.

A more recent driver has been the rapid adoption of GLP-1 medications like Ozempic and Wegovy, which suppress appetite significantly. People taking these drugs often struggle to consume enough nutrients simply because they no longer feel hungry. They must ensure every bite or sip is packed with essential nutrients to avoid muscle loss or malnutrition. For these users, a protein and fiber-dense shake offers a convenient way to meet those targets without forcing down food that feels unappealing.

There are reasons for concern, however, that go beyond the cultural. A Consumer Reports analysis of popular meal replacement powders found that several contained worrying levels of heavy metals, including lead and cadmium. One plant-based powder tested at more than fifteen times the daily lead intake that health authorities consider acceptable. Manufacturers have largely defended their products by pointing to industry certifications and third-party testing, but the supplement sector is not subject to the same pre-market scrutiny as pharmaceuticals, making safety claims difficult for ordinary consumers to verify independently.

Dietitians frequently question whether humans should ignore the physical act of chewing, which plays a vital role in digestion and feeling satisfied. Drinking calories quickly may not create the same sense of fullness as eating solid food, potentially leading people to snack more throughout the day. Most nutritionists land in a cautious middle position: whole foods remain the standard recommendation, but a well-formulated shake is meaningfully better than nothing for someone who would otherwise not eat at all.

The broader shift these products represent is harder to dismiss with a simple nutritional caveat. Meals have historically been the organizing rhythm of daily life, the reliable pause between other things. As that rhythm gets compressed into thirty seconds and a squeeze pouch, something more than chewing time gets lost. Convenience is certainly valuable, but engineering solid food entirely out of our daily routines might come at a cost that is simply too hard to swallow.

- 1) Do you think people are too busy to cook, or do they just prioritize convenience over cooking?
- 2) What does it say about modern work culture that someone invented a drink specifically so people wouldn't have to stop working for lunch?
- 3) Would you ever replace a regular meal with a shake or pouch?
- 4) How much of today's wellness industry is built on people being exhausted rather than on genuine health needs?

- 5) Should dietary supplements be regulated as strictly as pharmaceuticals, or is it the consumer's responsibility to research what they buy?
- 6) Have you ever skipped a meal to get more work done?
- 7) Is there value in the act of eating beyond simply getting nutrients?
- 8) Is the potential risk of heavy metals in a product a dealbreaker for you, or does convenience outweigh the risk?

Nutritious	(adj)	containing the nutrients the body needs to stay healthy	Eggs and whole grains make a nutritious breakfast that keeps you full until lunch.
Time crunch	(n)	a situation in which there is not enough time to do everything that needs to be done	The project manager warned the team that they were in a serious time crunch before the client presentation.
Health-conscious	(adj)	paying careful attention to maintaining a healthy diet and lifestyle	Health-conscious shoppers tend to spend more time reading ingredient labels before making a purchase.
Turn to	(phr v)	to start using something or relying on someone for help	After the injury, she turned to swimming as a low-impact form of exercise.
Niche	(n)	a small, specialized area of a market or field that appeals to a particular group of people	The bookshop survived by focusing on a niche market of rare first editions and signed copies.
Memorable	(adj)	likely to be remembered because it is special or impressive	The professor's opening lecture was so memorable that students quoted it years later.
A nod to something	(exp)	a reference to or acknowledgment of something	The architect's use of exposed brick was a nod to the building's industrial history.
Be chained to something	(exp)	to be unable to leave a place or situation because of constant demands or obligations	During tax season, accountants are practically chained to their desks from morning until midnight.
Every corner of	(exp)	every part of a place or area, including the smallest or most distant parts	Social media has reached every corner of daily life, from the workplace to the dinner table.
Trajectory	(n)	the path or direction that something follows as it develops over time	The young athlete's trajectory from local competitions to international championships was remarkable.

Recall	(n)	an official request for customers to return a product because it may be unsafe or faulty	The car manufacturer issued a recall after discovering a defect in the steering system.
Open a door	(idm)	to create a new opportunity or make something possible	Earning a second language can open a door to career opportunities that would otherwise be unavailable.
Vitality	(n)	energy, enthusiasm, and the quality of being strong and active	Regular sleep and exercise are often credited with maintaining vitality well into old age.
Ideological	(adj)	based on or relating to a particular system of ideas and beliefs	The debate between the two candidates was deeply ideological, reflecting very different views on the role of government.
Mental load	(n)	the ongoing cognitive effort involved in managing daily responsibilities and decisions	Dividing household responsibilities more equally can significantly reduce one partner's mental load.
Frame	(v)	to present or describe something in a particular way in order to influence how it is understood	The politician carefully framed the new tax policy as an investment in public education.
Driver	(n)	a factor that causes or strongly influences a particular outcome or development	Consumer demand for faster delivery has been a major driver of innovation in the logistics industry.
Suppress	(v)	to prevent something from happening, developing, or being expressed	Certain medications can suppress the immune system, making patients more vulnerable to infection.
Packed with	(phr)	completely full of a particular thing	The documentary was packed with interviews from scientists who had spent decades studying climate change.
Malnutrition	(n)	a medical condition caused by not consuming enough nutrients or the right balance of nutrients	Aid organizations warned that prolonged drought in the region could lead to widespread malnutrition.
Force down	(phr v)	to make yourself eat or drink something even though you do not want to	He wasn't hungry after the long flight, but he forced down a small meal before the meeting.

Unappealing	(adj)	not attractive, interesting, or pleasant	The apartment was unappealing at first glance, but after renovation it became one of the most desirable in the building.
Intake	(n)	the amount of a substance, especially food or drink, taken into the body over a period of time	Doctors recommended reducing his daily sodium intake after his blood pressure results came back high.
Scrutiny	(n)	careful and detailed examination, especially of something that may be wrong	The company's financial records came under intense scrutiny following reports of missing funds.
Dismiss	(v)	to decide that something is not worth thinking about or taking seriously	It would be a mistake to dismiss the findings simply because they challenge widely held assumptions.
Caveat	(n)	a warning or condition attached to a statement that limits or qualifies it	The study showed promising results, with the caveat that a much larger sample size would be needed to confirm them.
Rhythm	(n)	a regular, repeated pattern of events or activities	Moving to a new country disrupted her daily rhythm, and it took months to establish a new routine.
Too hard to swallow	(idm)	too difficult to accept or believe	The company's explanation for the sudden price increase was too hard to swallow for most loyal customers.