

- Convenience foods

## The whole (food) truth about UPFs

### ULTRA-PROCESSED FOODS ARE MAKING HEADLINES BUT ARE THEY REALLY BAD FOR OUR HEALTH? DIETITIAN JULIETTE KELLOW BUSTS SOME MYTHS

Paisley Daily Express · 18 Nov 2024 · 15

ULTRA-PROCESSED foods have had a lot of bad press of late, with research increasingly suggesting they're bad for our health. There's convincing evidence that eating more harms heart health, affects mental wellbeing, and increases the risk of Type 2 diabetes, a study in the British Medical Journal found. There are clear signs, too, that higher intakes may be linked to weight gain, sleep problems and high blood pressure.



Another study found six in 10 of us are worried about the health impacts of ultra-processed foods (UPFs) – yet we continue to eat large amounts. In the UK, more than half our calories come from this type of food, with this figure jumping to 75% for children and 83% for teens. But what exactly are UPFs, and what makes them harmful?

There's plenty of confusion out there, so we've broken down some common myths to help you understand more.

**MYTH:**

**FACT:** It's not that simple. Even experts struggle to agree what makes a food ultra-processed. In one study, food and nutrition specialists were asked to categorise foods based on their level of processing and the results varied widely. It's unsurprising as there's no universally accepted definition for processed foods.

The NOVA classification system is commonly used to define UPFs. Within this, the UPF category includes a vast range of foods, including ready meals, biscuits, soft drinks, savoury snacks, chicken nuggets and breakfast cereals.

But it isn't perfect. Originally developed for research, it wasn't intended for labelling individual foods as UPFs. Plus, it doesn't consider how nutritious foods are.

For example, bread is classified as a UPF regardless of whether it's a high-fibre wholemeal loaf full of seeds or a white loaf with far less fibre.

UPFs are easy to spot So how do you spot a UPF?

Nichola Ludlam-Raine, registered dietitian and author of *How Not to Eat Ultra-Processed* (Ebury Press), says: "UPFs are foods that have undergone significant processing and modification from their original state.

"They often contain many ingredients, including those not typically found in a home kitchen, such as stabilisers, emulsifiers, preservatives, colours and artificial flavourings."

Still not sure? Nichola says the five signs that suggest a UPF include:

- A long list of ingredients
- Unrecognisable ingredients
- Lots of red traffic lights on the label
- A long shelf life
- Bright, colourful packaging.

MYTH: All UPFs are unhealthy FACT:

This is not entirely true.

"Not all UPFs are created equal when it comes to their nutritional content," says Nichola. "Take baked beans and chocolate biscuits – both UPFs but with vastly different nutritional profiles. Baked beans contain mainly beans and tomatoes, providing protein, fibre and vitamins, while chocolate biscuits often feature high amounts of sugar and saturated fat with minimal nutritional benefit."

Research is certainly starting to back the idea that not all UPFs are unhealthy.

A study from *The Lancet* found for every 10% increase in UPFs, the risk of Type 2 diabetes jumped by 17%. But when the researchers looked more closely, they found some groups of UPFs, including plant-based alternatives, and breads and breakfast cereals, reduced the risk. Recent research from Harvard University revealed similar findings. While eating a lot of UPFs increased the risk of cardiovascular disease and stroke, yogurt and dairy-based desserts, and bread and breakfast cereals, didn't have the same negative effects. One possible explanation is that UPFs can vary dramatically in their nutrient content. "I like to divide more processed foods into two groups – those that are nutritious, such as fish fingers, baked beans and some wholemeal bread, and those that are less nutritious, such as chocolate biscuits, and some oven chips and crisps," says Nichola.

The key is not to lump all UPFs into the "unhealthy" category.

It's equally important to check the nutrition panel and choose foods with less saturated fat, added sugars and salt.

MYTH: UPFs are full of harmful additives

FACT: It's true that UPFs contain additives such as preservatives, emulsifiers, stabilisers, colourings and artificial flavourings, which keep food safe, improve shelf life, or enhance their taste, texture or appearance. From a safety aspect there's no need to worry.

Every additive is rigorously tested by the European Food Safety Authority before it's allowed to be used in food. Plus, the amount that's deemed safe is set way below the level that would harm health, even if it was eaten every day.

"Food additives are safe to consume, and you don't need to eliminate them completely," says Nichola. "But they can make food more appealing so that it's easier to consume large amounts."

**MYTH:** It's the processing that causes health problems

**FACT:** Studies certainly show eating a lot of UPFs is linked to health problems but it's still not clear whether the processing itself is to blame. Most evidence comes from observational studies, which show a link between UPFs and health problems, but these don't prove one causes the other.

It's likely that many elements of UPFs contribute to poorer health.

For starters, UPFs are often highly palatable – think crisps, sweets, and cakes. Their soft textures mean we can eat them quickly, making it easy to consume large amounts without feeling full.

“Evidence suggests people eat more when consuming a diet high in ultra-processed food,” explains Nichola.

“Researchers aren't entirely sure why this happens, but the easy-to-eat nature of the foods could lead to delayed satiety signalling.”

Processing food may also make it easier for our bodies to obtain calories from the food we eat. For example, studies show we absorb more calories from almond butter than from whole almonds, possibly because the nut has already been broken down for us, making it easier for our body to access the calories.

But perhaps the biggest reason for poorer health hinges on the fact eating a lot of UPFs makes it harder to achieve a balanced diet that's in line with healthy-eating guidelines. “Many UPFs contain more calories, added sugars, salt and unhealthy fats and lack essential nutrients such as fibre, vitamins and minerals,” says Nichola. “Plus these foods can easily push out healthier options in our diet.”

**MYTH:** Cutting out UPFs is enough to stay healthy

**FACT:** Eating fewer UPFs and more unprocessed or minimally processed foods is key to staying healthy. But even when diets largely consist of fruits, vegetables, wholegrains, pulses, nuts, seeds, and lean proteins, it's still important to choose portion sizes that help us achieve and maintain a healthy weight. This in turn can help to protect against conditions like heart disease and Type 2 diabetes.

Meanwhile, not all unprocessed foods should be eaten freely. For example, foods high in saturated fat like butter, cream and red meat can raise blood cholesterol, a risk factor for heart disease. Excessive salt is linked to high blood pressure and regularly eating sugar, honey or maple syrup contributes to tooth decay and adds extra calories.

Plus, we should limit cooked red meat to a maximum of 70g a day to protect against bowel cancer.

The bottom line:

Cutting back on UPFs is helpful, but it's still important to look at our overall diet and stick to the basics of healthy eating.