- Convenience foods

Processed power

Otago Daily Times · 1 Oct 2025 · 16

IF it feels like your child's diet consists entirely of breakfast cereal, chicken nuggets and snacks that'd outlast the apocalypse, you're not alone. Processed foods are the goto for many children, and for some, they're the only foods they'll eat. Here's why – and what you can do about it.



Processed foods and their prevalence in kids' diets

Processed foods are any foods altered from their natural state. While some food processing is beneficial — such as pasteurising milk to kill bacteria — the ones that cause parents concern are ultraprocessed foods, which use industrial methods to enhance flavour, texture and shelf life by adding sugars, salt, fats and artificial flavours, colours and preservatives.

Parents know some ultraprocessed foods all too well — they're the fast and junk foods children love. But others hide in plain sight, disguised as

"healthy" convenience foods such as flavoured yoghurts and muffins.

Ultraprocessed foods offer lowtono nutrition, which is why dietary guidelines recommend limiting them. But these "discretionary foods" make up onethird of Australian children's daily energy intake.

Why do children find processed foods so appealing?

Basic biology.

Ultraprocessed foods are engineered to be addictive, their added sugar, salt and fat

Children respond positively when healthy foods are presented in fun ways.

activating kids' brains' reward system, releasing feelgood chemicals.

Evolution has hardwired humans to seek natural sugarand fatrich foods, a physiological response our huntergatherer ancestors developed to avoid starvation.

Food fussiness

One in two children will experience a fussy eating phase — another survival response inherited from our ancestors, who avoided toxins by developing an aversion to unfamiliar and bitter foods. Fussy eaters also favour ultraprocessed foods, such as chicken nuggets, chips and break-

fast cereals, because they're familiar and nonthreatening, often beige like breastmilk and kids' first solid foods. Plus their blander flavours don't overwhelm developing tastebuds.

Pester power

From sneaky YouTube ads to eyelevel supermarket displays, children are incessantly exposed to marketing that makes them crave — and demand — ultraprocessed foods.

How processed foods impact kids' health

Ultraprocessed foods can impact kids' health in a range of ways, contributing to.—

Nutritional deficiencies. children filling up on ultraprocessed foods are less likely to eat vegetables, fruits, whole grains and lean meats, producing a diet lacking in fibre and other key nutrients needed for growth and development

Childhood obesity. Ultraprocessed foods are high in calories, unhealthy sugars, salt and fat, and often lack portion control, promoting overeating

Increased risk of diseases. Longterm overconsumption of ultraprocessed foods is linked to a higher risk of developing a range of chronic diseases, including heart disease, type 2 diabetes and cancer.

Unhealthy eating habits can be hard to break, but positive diet and lifestyle changes — even later in childhood — can reverse these negative health effects.

Sciencebased tips for healthier eating habits

1. Eat together

Family mealtimes allow you to model healthy eating. Sit together around the table, share the same meal, and put devices away so everyone's attention is on eating.

2. Introduce foods carefully

Research shows children need eight to 10 exposures before they willingly eat new foods. So offer them regularly, encourage tasting and don't pressure them to eat.

While it's tempting, avoid offering dessert as a reward for trying something healthy. Using treats as a reward increases kids' preference for unhealthy foods. Children are also more likely to try new foods when they're hungry, so avoid snacks one to preferably two hours before mealtimes.

3. Introduce variety to family favourites

Children are more open to trying new foods when there's something familiar on their plate. So, tweak family favourites by swapping ingredients, such as using lentils instead of beef in bolognese or roasting carrots to make "orange chippies". Grating veggies into sauces also expands kids' diets without overwhelming them.

4. Make food fun

Children respond positively when healthy foods are presented in fun ways, so include different colours, textures and shapes on their plate to hold their interest. Changing meal locations — and enjoying an occasional outdoor picnic — is another simple way to make mealtimes feel special and fun.

5. Teach children about the science of food

Teaching children in an ageappropriate way about the foods we eat promotes healthier eating, so.—

Encourage children to grow herbs and vegetable so they understand where healthy food comes from: toddlers can harvest produce; older children can plant and prune
Visit the greengrocer, fishmonger and butcher regularly so children can see and explore the healthy foods on offer
Talk to toddlers about food in energy terms: “eating wholegrain toast helps you play longer”
Share fun facts with older children: “fish has a special type of fat called omega3 that makes us smarter”.
6. Involve children in cooking
Spark kids’ interest in healthy meals by involving them in food preparation. Let them choose recipes and take on ageappropriate tasks such as mixing and chopping.
When children help make a meal, they feel proud of their effort, and research shows they’re more likely to try what they’ve created.
It takes about two months to form a habit, so expect resistance along the way. But with perseverance, we can shift kids’ love of processed foods towards healthier choices, helping them establish healthy eating habits for life.
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