- Convenience foods

Study shows diet that limits ultra-processed foods isn't automatically healthy

The Korea Times · 8 Jul 2024 · 18

A diet that limits ultra-processed foods isn't automatically healthy, and the types of foods people eat may matter more than the level of processing used to make them, a new study suggests.

The findings were presented Sunday at the American Society for Nutrition's annual meeting in Chicago.

Researchers compared two menus that reflect a typical Western diet — one that emphasizes minimally processed foods and the other that focuses on the ultra-processed variety, according to the NOVA Food
Classification System.

This system categorizes foods into one of four groups based on processing-related criteria. It was designed by Center for Epidemiological Studies in Health and Nutrition in the School of Public Health at the University of Sao Paulo, Brazil.

The less-processed menu was more than double in price and reached its expiration date more than three times more quickly without providing any additional nutritional value.

This outcome demonstrated that "both ultra-processed and less processed foods can have a low healthy eating score," Allen Levine, a professor emeritus in the Department of Food Science and Nutrition at the University of Minnesota in St. Paul, told UPI via email.

Levine classified the various foods in the NOVA system for the study.

"Also, ultra-processed foods with a healthy eating score similar to the less-processed foods have a longer shelf life and are less costly," Levine said.

Based on these findings, it's possible to consume a low-quality diet even when selecting mostly minimally processed foods, the researchers noted.

"The results of this study indicate that building a nutritious diet involves more than a consideration of food processing as defined by NOVA," the study's principal investigator, Julie Hess, said in a news release.

"The concepts of 'ultra-processed' foods and 'less-processed' foods need to be better characterized by the nutrition research community," said Hess, a research nutritionist at the U.S. Department of Agriculture/Agriculture Research Service Grand Forks
Human Nutrition Research Center.

For the new study, the researchers posed the opposite question: Can you build a low-quality menu that obtain most of its calories from "simple" foods?

To answer that question, they constructed a less-processed menu, which sourced 20 percent of calories from ultra-processed foods, and a more-processed menu, which derived 67 percent of calories from ultra-processed foods. The NOVA system determined the level of processing involved in each menu.