

WHAT TO KNOW ABOUT Ultra-Processed Foods & Your Health

We hear a lot about processed and ultra-processed foods and their links to obesity and other chronic diseases. But what makes foods “ultra-processed”? How does eating them affect our health? Here’s what researchers know.

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What is processed food? What about ultra-processed food?

A food **changed from its natural form in any way is considered processed**. Certain processing, such as pasteurization, is beneficial for health. Processes such as freezing or canning of produce can reduce food waste.

While there has been a lot of talk about ultra-processed foods recently, **there is not yet a clear definition**. Ultra-processed foods tend to include ingredients and additives not generally used in home cooking and contribute to excess calorie consumption. Most are characterized by being **low in nutritional quality and high in saturated fats, added sugars, and sodium (salt)**. National and state organizations are currently working on better defining ultra-processed foods.

How do I recognize ultra-processed food?

Look at the **nutrition facts label** on a food package for high amounts (>20% of the daily value per serving) of saturated fats, added sugars, and sodium.

New tools and apps are also emerging to make identifying “ultra-processed” foods easier.

55%

of calories consumed by people ages 1 and older in the U.S. are from “ultra-processed” foods.

70%

of grocery store products in the U.S. are “ultra-processed”.

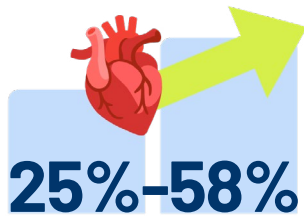


COLA	
Nutrition Facts	
Serving Size:	1 bottle
Calories	140
% Daily Value*	
Total Fat 0g	0%
Saturated Fat 0g	0%
Cholesterol 0mg	0%
Sodium 45mg	2%
Total Carbohydrate 39g	14%
Dietary Fiber 0g	0%
Total Sugars 39g	
Incl. 39g Added Sugars	78%
Protein 0g	



FROZEN SAUSAGE & PEPPERONI PIZZA	
Nutrition Facts	
Serving Size:	1 individual pizza
Calories	410
% Daily Value*	
Total Fat 20g	26%
Saturated Fat 9g	45%
Cholesterol 20mg	7%
Sodium 920mg	40%
Total Carbohydrate 48g	17%
Dietary Fiber 3g	11%
Total Sugars 3g	
Includes 2g Added Sugars	4%
Protein 9g	

HIGH ULTRA-PROCESSED FOOD INTAKE HAS BEEN LINKED TO:



higher risk of health issues related to the heart and metabolism.



higher risk of mortality.

How do ultra-processed foods impact your health?

Multiple studies have linked a diet with higher amounts of ultra-processed food with **obesity, cancer, heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and mental disorders**, as well as an **increased risk of death**. The causes of specific health effects are still being studied, but could occur because ultra-processed foods often have high amounts of added sugar, sodium, and saturated fat, and low amounts of fiber, vitamins, and minerals.

Are all processed foods unhealthy?

No. Some foods that are processed, but not ultra-processed, like dried fruit and cut and bagged vegetables, are healthy because they provide a lot of nutrition without extra sugar, salt, or other preservatives. Nutrients added to foods can help give extra nutrition and improve health. For example, vitamin D is added to milk to aid calcium absorption, making bones stronger. Some ultra-processed foods, such as **whole-grain breads and yogurts**, are associated with **reduced risks of chronic diseases**, including colorectal cancer. **Researchers and advocates should be aware that better classifications are needed.**

Are ultra-processed foods addictive?

From the limited research on this topic, ultra-processed foods do not seem to be addictive in the same way many drugs are. The research does suggest the high energy density and tastiness of these foods reward our brains in a way that may contribute to overconsumption. **The reasons why many people overeat such foods are likely complex.**

Four ways to reduce processed foods in your diet:



Try to **plan and prepare meals at home in advance** that use less processed foods.

If fresh fruits and vegetables are too expensive, choose **minimally processed frozen or canned options with no added salt or sugar** instead.



If time is short and an ultra-processed option is all that's available, choose options with less sodium, saturated fat, and added sugar, and **add an unprocessed fruit or vegetable** to improve nutritional quality.

Instead of soda and other sweetened drinks, choose **water and unsweetened beverages** like coffee and tea.

