

Ultra Processed Foods and Their Effects on Health

Ultra processed foods usually contain long list of preservatives, colorings, flavorings and other ingredients that would harm our health. The majority of the foods that we eat in the United States are ultra processed. In the typical grocery store most of the foods and beverages lining the shelves are ultra processed.

WHAT MAKES A FOOD "ULTRA PROCESSED".

The term ultra processed foods originated from the nova food classification system, which defines food in to four categories, ranging from least to most processed.

-Unprocessed or minimally processed foods like grains, fruits, vegetables, milk, or fish.

-Processed culinary ingredients like salt, sugar, olive oil and butter

-Processed food, such as jam, pickles, or canned fruits.

-Ultra processed foods like energy drinks, instant oatmeal, sliced bread, and hotdog.

Ultra processed foods have one or more ingredients like chemical-based preservatives, hydrogenated oil, sweeteners, like high fructose corn syrup, and artificial colors and flavors. Ultra processed food undergo processing techniques, like pre-frying, molding, fractioning and other chemical alterations that leave the final product showing no resemblance to the original ingredients.

The processes and ingredients used to create ultra processed foods often make these foods hyper palatable, meaning they are designed to be exceptionally appealing to humans and can be addictive. Ultra processed foods typically contain a combination of ingredients like sugar, fat and salt that stimulate the brain's reward system, making it hard to stop eating them.

WHAT MAKES ULTRA PROCESSED FOOD UNHEALTHY

Ultra processed foods are often associated with worse diet quality and a long and growing list of health outcomes. Study done in 2024 revealed that ultra processed foods are more likely to several health conditions, including obesity, type 2 diabetes, cardio-metabolic diseases, many cancers, gastrointestinal disorders, asthma, anxiety, depression, cardiovascular events, and all cause mortality.

World Health Organization (WHO) classified ultra processed foods as type 1 carcinogen- a category shared by tobacco and asbestos for their link to colorectal cancer.

Study published in JOURNAL OF AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION showed that compared with women with healthier diets, women who eat a lot of ultra processed foods are 1.5 times more likely to develop pre-cancerous polyps before the age of 50.

Sodas have some of the strongest evidence for health harming ingredients, several additives, high sugar or artificial sweeteners and lacking essential nutrients(which our ancestors never encountered) and this can potentially cause health issues like obesity, heart disease and type 2 diabetes.

Ultra processing changes how our bodies metabolize these foods, making them pre-digested. This leads to rapid absorption of sugar and fats and spikes in blood sugar. It also bypasses the need for the body to break down food, which can lead to a disrupted gut microbiomes because of the low fiber content and potential harm from addictive.

This can increase the risk of inflammation and bowel disease, insulin resistance, etc..

WHAT CAN YOU DO

Try to avoid ultra processed foods and eat whole foods. Read the ingredient list. If it contains ingredients you cannot pronounce, avoid it. Eat locally grown foods. Cook at home more often. Replace sugary drinks with water. Avoid artificial sweeteners. Remember that ultra processed foods are designed to make you overeat.

