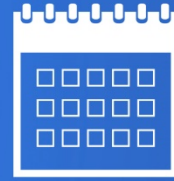




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TIPS FOR REDUCING PROCESSED FOODS IN YOUR DIET

Processed foods have become a staple in American diets due to their convenience, taste and affordability, as well as their long shelf life. Yet, an increasing number of health experts are warning of the concerning impacts of these foods. A diet largely consisting of processed food can lead to chronic diseases, mental health issues and even early death.

This article provides an overview of processed foods and their health impacts, explores related federal and public health guidance, and offers tips to limit these foods in your diet.

Overview of Processed Foods

Federal agencies have no standard definition of “processed food,” but several departments and health organizations offer guidelines. According to the NOVA Food Classification System, a commonly used guide, food is classified into four groups:

1. Unprocessed or minimally processed foods (e.g., eggs, fruits, vegetables, nuts and fresh meats)
2. Processed culinary ingredients (e.g., butter and oils made from seeds, nuts and vegetables)
3. Processed foods (e.g., canned fruits, vegetables and beans; salted, cured and smoked meats; and canned fish)
4. Ultra-processed foods (e.g., cereals, soft drinks, commercially produced bakery items, lunch meats and packaged snacks)

More broadly, the U.S. Department of Agriculture defines processed foods as “raw agricultural commodities altered from their original state,” which could include cut, washed, pasteurized, cooked or dried foods. The Mayo Clinic further clarifies that food becomes ultra-processed when it contains preservatives or additives; is high in added sugars, salt, oils and fats; or is considered an industrial formulation.

Health Impacts of Ultra-processed Foods

Ultra-processed foods have the most significant adverse effects on health. According to Harvard Medical School, these foods make up about 70% of grocery store items, making them difficult to avoid. Health experts at Harvard warn about the negative health impacts of ultra-processed food. About 678,000 Americans die every year from chronic food illnesses caused by poor diets, typically high in ultra-processed foods. These illnesses include obesity, heart disease, certain cancers and Type 2 diabetes.

Ultra-processed foods are not only attributed to physical diseases but mental health issues as well. Harvard research found that high amounts of these foods may increase the risk of depression and dementia. Moreover, the high levels of fats, sugars and salt make them tasty but addictive. So, the more ultra-processed food you

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eat, the more you'll want to keep eating them, increasing your risk of health concerns.

Government Guidance on Ultra-processed Foods

Currently, federal agencies provide little guidance regarding ultra-processed foods. Certain laws prohibit substances in food that may cause illness, but regulatory agencies like the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) focus on contaminants that cause acute rather than chronic illnesses. Furthermore, while the U.S. Dietary Guidelines recommend a diet high in fruits, vegetables and other whole foods, they lack specific guidance on the consumption of ultra-processed food.

Due to the absence of government oversight, health experts are urging the USDA and FDA to regulate the development and marketing of ultra-processed foods. These agencies have begun researching the effects of ultra-processed foods on health, and there is likely to be more guidance on such foods in the future.

How to Reduce Ultra-processed Foods in Your Diet

Because much of the United States' food supply is ultra-processed, cutting these items out entirely can be difficult, so try starting with small steps.

Consider the following tips to remove ultra-processed food from your diet:

- **Read the label.** A good way to identify ultra-processed food is to read the nutritional information and ingredients on the label. Learn which foods have high amounts of additives and preservatives, such as high-fructose corn syrup, hydrogenated oils, dyes, sodium nitrates and nitrites, and sulfites. Scan for saturated and trans fats; consider options with healthier ingredients, or look for options lower in these fats. Also, be sure to watch for added sugar, fats and salt.
- **Shake up your shopping routine.** At the grocery store, avoid ultra-processed foods, such as cereals and frozen meals, and buy whole and minimally processed foods like fruits and vegetables when possible. Additionally, change your shopping route; as a rule, the perimeter of the grocery store holds more of the minimally processed and unprocessed foods, such as the produce section. However, keep

in mind that some of these sections, such as the deli and bakery, still contain some processed or ultra-processed items.

- **Have healthy snacks available.** Keeping whole-food options on hand makes it easier to reach for these instead of processed snacks. Such alternatives can include fresh fruit, nuts, vegetables and hummus. If you have time, you can prep snacks like hard-boiled eggs or homemade veggie chips.
- **Replace refined grains with whole grains.** Swapping refined grains—such as white pasta, rice and bread—for whole-grain options can provide you with essential nutrients like fiber.
- **Incorporate healthier ingredients.** Using healthier replacements for common ingredients is a small but effective way to reduce processed food from your diet. For example, you can use nuts instead of croutons in salads, or have oatmeal with fruit instead of sugary cereal.
- **Meal prep.** Preparing meals ahead of time helps you avoid opting for convenience food or fast food, which are usually ultra-processed. Cooking at home and prepping large quantities ensures you have a ready-to-eat, healthy option, even when you're short on time or too busy to cook.
- **Add vegetables.** Including vegetables in your meals allows you to increase your consumption of nutritious, unprocessed food. Due to the added fiber, eating vegetables can also help decrease your appetite and curb cravings by helping you feel full longer.
- **Avoid processed meat.** Meats such as sausage, hot dogs, and lunch meat can be easy to prepare and often are household favorites, but they are likely ultra-processed. Choose less processed meats like chicken, salmon or turkey. Plant-based proteins, such as beans, lentils, tofu and tempeh, are also healthy options.

Summary

Even though it may not be realistic to avoid processed foods entirely, even small dietary changes can have significant benefits. Making informed food choices can help you take control of your health.

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Before making dietary changes, consult your doctor.
Reach out to them with any concerns about your diet or health.

Contact us for more resources.