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How to avoid ultra processed foods when you're vegan

More people are cutting out meat in favour of plant-based diets for ethical, environmental and health reasons. But not all plant-based foods – either vegetarian or vegan – are as healthy as we think they are. In fact, some are classed as ultra-processed foods, which have been linked to heart disease and cancer¹.

There are plenty of reasons to follow a plant-based diet. They can be a great way to eat more fruits, [vegetables](#) and pulses, which contain lots of nutrients that are good for us – as well as plenty of fibre to keep our digestive systems healthy.

Vegetarians, [vegans](#) and pescatarians – those that only eat fish – also avoid eating [red meat](#) or [processed](#) meat like sausages and bacon, which contain more salt and fat and have been linked to cancer². And of course, there are environmental benefits to eating less meat, including lowering carbon emissions.

Eating more plants and less meat also reduces the risk of health problems like [heart disease](#). A study published in the European Heart Journal, which included 2,372 participants, compared the effect of vegetarian or vegan diets with omnivorous diets – eating meat and vegetables. The results found that plant-based diets lowered the risk of [heart attack](#) and [stroke](#)³.

However, research shows a plant-based diet isn't always healthy. Imitation meats or meat substitutes – such as vegan nuggets, sausages, and burgers or fake chicken pieces and ready meals – are sometimes classified as ultra-processed foods⁴.

These are convenience foods that contain additives like [sweeteners](#), salt and artificial flavours but contain few nutrients.

Why are some plant-based foods ultra-processed?

Reema Patel, a registered dietitian at [Dietitian Fit](#), says that the rise in vegetarianism and veganism has led to a demand for meat alternatives in recent years.

"Whilst these may seem like a great way to help reduce meat consumption – if that is your aim – it is also important to keep in mind that many of these alternatives would be classed as ultra-processed foods," she says.

"Often, these foods contain additives such as emulsifiers, texturisers and colours. They may also be classed as high added [salt](#), fat or sugar foods," she says. "It's important to look at the overall processing of a plant-based product to understand its nutritional profile and to ensure it is actually a more nutritious option."

There's no denying that eating less [meat](#) – and particularly [red meat](#) – can come with health benefits. But ultimately, meat and fish in their purest form are unlikely to be heavily processed because they are a single ingredient food.

When we try to recreate them using ingredients like soya, bean or pea protein, we have to process them to make them look and taste palatable. This means adding salt, sugar, fat and other additives to increase taste and prolong their shelf-life. However, we assume they're healthy because of the 'plant-based' label.

Should we be eating plant-based alternatives?

Often, [vegan](#) or [vegetarian](#) meat alternatives or ready meals contain less saturated fat than animal-based products – so ultra-processed or not, you'll be eating less saturated fat and that's a good thing. However, any ultra-processed foods still contain more sugar, salt and other additives to provide flavour or texture.

Eating ultra-processed plant-based foods every so often is unlikely to cause any health problems. But overall – as is the case with any ultra-processed foods – it is probably better to eat them in moderation.

How to eat less vegan or vegetarian ultra-processed foods

Patel advises to pay attention to the nutrient content of convenience foods when at the supermarket. Look at the ingredients list – if it's very long and contains things you've not heard of, it's probably very [processed](#).

It's not easy to eat healthily all the time when you're busy. But cooking meals or sauces in batches and freezing them can make things easier when you're tired or don't have much time.

Lentils, beans or other pulses like chickpeas can bulk up a meal easily without the need for fake meats. Garlic, herbs and spices can make a dish tasty without additives like sweeteners or artificial flavours.

"Overall, whole foods that are plant based, are considered the most beneficial to our health, such as fruits, [vegetables](#), grains, pulses, unprocessed soy, nuts and seeds, rather than vegan products which have undergone a high level of processing," says Patel.

Further reading

1. [Isaksen et al: Ultra-processed food consumption and cancer risk: A systematic review and meta-analysis.](#)
2. [Bouvard et al: Carcinogenicity of consumption of red and processed meat.](#)
3. [Koch et al: Vegetarian or vegan diets and blood lipids: a meta-analysis of randomised trials.](#)
4. [Ohlau et al: Plant-Based Diets Are Not Enough? Understanding the Consumption of Plant-Based Meat Alternatives Along Ultra-processed Foods in Different Dietary Patterns in Germany.](#)

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