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Which ultra-processed foods are safe – and which should we avoid?

Ultra-processed foods are associated with cancer, heart disease and type 2 diabetes. Yet while some foods do increase your risk of developing these diseases, new research shows that not all processed foods are as bad for you as we think.

Ultra-processed food (UPF) is food that you cannot make at home because it contains a lot of ingredients that you tend not to find in your cupboards. These foods are often cheap, convenient and have a long shelf-life – and contain lots of additives, sugars and sweeteners.

But a major new study suggests that not all [ultra-processed foods](#) are bad for us. An analysis of the eating habits of more than 250,000 people in seven European countries found that regular consumption of certain foods, such as sausages and sugary drinks, increases the risk of developing diseases like cancer¹. However, other ultra-processed foods – like certain types of bread – may be safe, and even potentially beneficial, because they contain [fibre](#).

Ultra-processed foods are, on the whole, harmful to our health, according to the study. This means that someone who eats a lot of these foods is at higher risk of conditions such as heart disease that could lead to a potentially fatal condition, like a [heart attack](#).

However, it gives a more detailed picture of which ultra-processed foods increase that risk – and which don't.

Which ultra-processed foods are safe to eat?

Wholemeal bread

The **fibre** content of wholemeal bread can make it a healthy processed food. Often, loaves contain added vitamins and minerals like **folic acid**, which is essential for a healthy pregnancy. However, not every loaf of bread is the same and some are better for us than others. Wholemeal or brown breads contain more fibre and the flour used is less processed than white alternatives.

Breakfast cereal

Cereal also contains fibre and has added minerals and vitamins, like **vitamin D**. Breakfast cereals can be an important source of nutrition – especially among those on a tighter financial budget.

Like bread, though, not all cereals are healthy. Look for cereals without added sugar or sweeteners. Usually, cereal packages have a ‘traffic-light’ system which tells you how high the sugar content is. If the cereal is in the ‘red’ category, avoid it.

Shredded Wheat is a good choice as it doesn’t contain any added sugar or salt, and is high in fibre. Microwave porridges can be a healthier option also, but not the flavoured versions. For all cereals, instead of sugar use fruit such as banana or blueberries to sweeten and use low fat milks.

Tinned vegetables and fish

Packaged foods, like tinned vegetables or tuna, have been processed but not in a way that is highly detrimental to health. Tinned vegetables can be a quick, convenient and cheap way to consume fibre and nutrients. Tuna – as well as other tinned fish – can be a good source of protein and B vitamins.

Ready meals

Ultra-processed ready meals can include chicken nuggets, pizzas and supermarket curries and pasta sauces – but they aren’t all the same. The longer the ingredients list – and the more sugar and fat they contain – the more likely they are to be bad for you.

Some shop-bought ready meals are still processed but are healthier. For example, a lasagna that contains lots of whole ingredients and fewer additives. Organic versions may be less processed, but they are often more expensive.

There are also some healthier ready meals available through the post. Food from the likes of [Field Doctor](#), [Cook](#) or [Mindful Chef](#).

Ultimately, you'll need to check the ingredients on the packet to see if the food is ultra-processed.

Checking the label for UPFs

Reading a label on the packet and knowing which ingredients to look out for can be a tricky and often time consuming process. Some of the key things to look out for are added protein sources, such as casein and gluten - people with coeliac or a gluten allergy should be especially careful of gluten. Most added sugars are bad for you and they often appear under names such as glucose syrup, dextrose or fructose. Protein and sugars tend to be listed in the middle of the label.

Other additives to watch out for, include flavour enhancers, colouring, and thickeners - these are usually listed at the end of the label.

The free [Open Food Facts](#) app, gives a handy tool to understand the food labels and whether they are ultra processed.

Not all ultra-processed foods are the same

Many foods are processed, including **dairy-free milks** like oat milk. However, this doesn't mean they should be avoided as there are different levels of ultra-processed foods.

According to the researchers, the problem is that the term 'ultra-processed' is very broad. Generally, there are four main categories of processed foods:

Unprocessed or minimally processed foods

This includes fruit, vegetables, milk, fish, pulses, eggs, nuts and seeds that have no added ingredients and haven't really been changed from their natural state.

Processed ingredients

This includes foods that are added to other foods rather than eaten by themselves, such as salt, sugar and oil.

Processed foods

These are foods that are made by combining foods from groups 1 and 2, which are altered in a way that home cooks could do themselves. They include foods such as jam, tinned fruit and vegetables, homemade breads and cheeses.

Ultra-processed foods

Ultra-processed foods usually have five or more ingredients. They tend to include many additives and ingredients that are not typically used in home cooking, such as preservatives, emulsifiers, artificial sweeteners and flavours.

What to avoid

Drinks that contain artificial [sweeteners](#) or sugar, animal-based products like sausages, and condiments like barbecue sauce should be eaten in moderation.

Consider your overall diet

It's also about considering your diet as a whole. It's important to focus on fresh, natural foods like fruit, vegetables, pulses and wholegrains - and microwave sachets of plain wholegrain rice are a quick and easy option. Also, limit the amount of sugary sweets and takeaways you eat.

Further reading

1. [Cordova et al: Consumption of ultra-processed foods and risk of multimorbidity of cancer and cardiometabolic diseases: a multinational cohort study.](#)

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