

# ULTRA-PROCESSED FOODS: The Hidden Health Villain in Your Diet



From fast food to frozen dinners, many of the foods we consume today are heavily processed — or "ultra-processed" — and often come in pre-packaged forms that are high in calories, sugar and unhealthy fats. While they may be convenient and tasty, the rise of ultra-processed foods has been linked to a range of health problems, from obesity to heart disease.

Examples of ultra-processed foods include sugary drinks, candy, chips, fast food and frozen dinners. Typically, they're subjected to multiple processing methods that transform their taste, texture and appearance into something not found in nature. Think Frosted Flakes, Hot Pockets, doughnuts, hot dogs, cheese crackers and boxed macaroni and cheese.

But some ultra-processed foods include products you may think of as relatively healthy, such as breakfast cereals, muffins, snack bars and sweetened yogurts. Soft drinks and energy drinks count, too.

In dozens of large studies, scientists have found that ultra-processed foods are linked to higher rates of obesity, heart disease, hypertension, type 2 diabetes and colon cancer. A recent study of more than 22,000 found that people who ate a lot of ultra-processed foods had a 19% higher likelihood of early death and a 32% higher risk of dying from heart disease compared with people who ate few ultra-processed foods.

## How to Reset Your Diet for Better Health

Getting ultra-processed foods out of your daily diet can be challenging, but it's an important step towards better health. Here are some tips for reducing your consumption of ultra-processed foods:

- 1 **Choose whole foods:** Whole foods are foods that are in their natural state, such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean proteins and healthy fats. These foods are typically more nutritious and less processed than their packaged counterparts.
- 2 **Cook at home:** Cooking meals at home allows you to control the ingredients and avoid the added sugars, salt and unhealthy fats found in many packaged foods. Meal prepping and planning ahead can help make cooking at home more manageable.
- 3 **Read food labels:** When buying packaged foods, read the labels and look for foods with fewer ingredients and minimal additives. Avoid foods with added sugars, high levels of sodium or unhealthy fats.
- 4 **Eliminate sugary drinks:** Sugary sodas and sports drinks have many additives and little or no nutritional value. Substitute with sparkling water with lemon or lime, unsweetened teas or plain water or water flavored with real fruit.
- 5 **Snack smart:** Choose whole food snacks, such as fruits, vegetables and nuts, over packaged snacks like chips, cookies and candy.
- 6 **Be mindful of fast food:** Fast food is often high in calories, sodium and unhealthy fats. If you must eat fast food, choose options that are grilled, baked or steamed, and avoid fried foods.
- 7 **Seek support:** Making dietary changes can be challenging, so seek support from family, friends or a registered dietitian who can help you stay on track and achieve your goals.