Understanding processed foods

Be Well

Health

Wellness

Nutrition

Support

Introduction

'Processed food' has a bad reputation. However, both cheese and fresh bread are both considered 'processed' and aren't necessarily unhealthy.

Processing, therefore, is not a way to determine the healthiness of a food, but a way for us to understand how much the product may have been altered from its original, natural state.

By splitting processing up into 4 categories (using the NOVA classification system), we can understand what and how much processing different foods have had.

Contents

Nova classification food groups

Developed by researchers at the University of São Paulo, Brazil in 2009, the Nova classification (from the Portuguese '*nova classificação' or 'new classification'*) divides foods into four groups based on the level of processing involved.

The four different food groups are...

- **Group One:** Unprocessed and minimally processed foods
- **Group Two:** Processed ingredients
- **Group Three:** Processed foods
- **Group Four:** Ultra-processed foods

Group One: Unprocessed and minimally processed foods

Unprocessed and minimally processed foods make up 30 per cent of the calories eaten in a typical UK diet. Unprocessed foods include anything in its natural state, such as:

- Fruit and vegetables
- Nuts and seeds
- Grains, beans and pulses
- Natural animal products (e.g. eggs, fish, milk and unprocessed meat)

'Minimally processed' foods may have been dried, crushed, roasted, frozen, boiled or pasteurised, but importantly contain no added ingredients. They include frozen fruits and vegetables, frozen fish, pasteurised milk, fruit juices, no-added sugar yoghurt, spices and dried herbs.

Group Two: Processed ingredients

Processed ingredients are foods we use from our store cupboard to add to foods from group one. You wouldn't usually eat these foods on their own, but they can be used to make other meals.

These include:

- Oils and vinegars
- Butter
- Sugars and salt
- Herbs and spices

Group Three: Processed foods

Processed foods are products that are made using ingredients from group one and two. The main purpose of processing the foods in this classification group is to prolong their shelf life or improve their taste.

Processed foods include:

- Bacon, smoked and processed meats
- Cheeses
- Fresh bread
- Salted or sugared nuts
- Tinned fruit in syrup

Group Four: Ultra-processed foods (UPFs)

On average, ultra-processed foods (UPFs) make up 76 per cent of our diet here in the UK. UPFs usually contain ingredients that you wouldn't add when cooking food at home.

You are unlikely to know the names of these as many will be chemicals, colourings, sweeteners and preservatives. Often they are difficult to say out loud or spell.

The most eaten ultra-processed foods in the UK are:

- Bread
- Pre-packaged meals
- Breakfast cereals
- Sausages and other similar meat products
- Sweets, biscuits, pastries, cakes
- Frozen oven chips
- Soft drinks, fruit drinks and fruit juices
- Salty snacks, crisps, sauces, dressings and gravy

It can be hard to spot some ultra-processed foods because the same type of food could be classified in Group Three instead, depending on how it has been made.

For example:

- Bread made from flour, water, salt and yeast is processed, but when you add extra chemicals it becomes ultra-processed.
- Plain oats, cornflakes and shredded wheat are minimally processed, but when the manufacturer adds sugar, flavourings or colouring, they become ultra-processed.
- Plain yoghurt is minimally processed, but add sweeteners, preservatives, stabilisers or colouring and it becomes ultra-processed.

As such, it's important to always read the label.

Five ways to recognise ultra-processed foods

Ultra-processed foods (UPFs) can be eaten and enjoyed as part of a balanced diet, but it's important to be aware of them and to limit or reduce the amount we eat. That's because these foods have been evidenced to cause harm to health, contain lower nutritional value, and are more likely to cause obesity.

Here are five ways to spot an ultra-processed food:

- A long list of ingredients (usually five or more) may indicate that a food is ultra-processed, especially if the list includes things you do not recognise or cannot pronounce.
- Check the 'traffic light' labels. Ultra-processed foods commonly contain high levels (red) of fat, sugar and salt.
- 'Fresh food' with a long shelf life may indicate the presence of preservatives. Check the label for preservatives such as sodium benzoate, nitrate and sulphite, BHA and BHT.
- Advertising campaigns and branding with catchy slogans and songs. These are designed to make the product appealing and sell the product to you, and are common tactics for ultra-processed foods.
- After eating the food you get instant satisfaction only to be left feeling hungry again soon after.

Final thought

Use the five tips to recognise ultra-processed foods and try to limit these as much as you can. Avoiding processed foods altogether is impossible, but choosing more foods that have gone through less processing, shopping local and reducing packaging will benefit your health and the environment.

If you would like to learn more or require more information and support, please get in touch!

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