

HEAL Support Group

MONTHLY HEALTH TOPIC - March 2023

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Topic for the month: **ULTRA-PROCESSED FOODS.**

You may have heard that we should “eat less processed foods” (and it’s listed as item #3 of our **10 Commitments**). But aren’t most foods processed in some way? And are there some processed foods that are ok to include in a healthy diet? To explore this topic, we will use the resources below; then we will take action using the tips on pages 2-3.

Note: There is no expectation that we will completely eliminate these foods from our lives! The true goal is to use LESS of them - by either removing ones that we simply don’t need, or replacing them with less processed items.

START WITH THIS ARTICLE from the *Washington Post* which covers these questions & more.

❖ *The article has an option to have it read to you (8 minutes) if you learn better this way.*

What are ultra processed foods? What should I eat instead?

WATCH AND LEARN from these short YouTube videos.

❖ *The time commitment to watch is listed with each clip.*

INTRO VIDEOS

❖ *Learn which foods we are talking about, using the **NOVA** system.*

What are ultra processed foods (1:03) - Imperial College of London

A transformative new way of classifying foods (4:19) - BBC

REASONS TO BACK AWAY + COMPASSION AND POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

❖ *The correlation between consuming these foods with weight gain and other comorbidities is named. However, these foods have become part of our society for valid reasons. Removing or replacing them will require some new solutions. These topics are explored in this video below.*

How bad are ultra processed foods? (8:52) - Diet Doctor

SENSIBLE DISCUSSION, ADVICE, PRACTICAL TIPS

❖ *Addictive qualities of ultra processed foods are discussed as well as the lack of nutrition value; practical ways to reduce them are named. 9 benefits of stopping them are listed.*

What happens when you STOP processed food? (10:17) - Lacey Baier

MORE ADVANCED - PODCAST EPISODE

The Impact of Ultra Processed Foods on your Gut, Brain, and Metabolic Health (1:12) - Everyday Wellness Podcast - Episode 248 - Cynthia Thurlow with Shawn Stevenson

EXPLORE THE [TRUE FOOD TOOL](#).

- ❖ This tool was mentioned in the Washington Post article above. Developed by researchers, this resource compares foods according to specified categories. On the website you can read more about [how foods are compared](#) to arrive at the score they are given. Lower numbers preferred!
- ❖ Note that these foods are ranked using their specific system, which is focused on food processing as well as the level of sugar, salt, preservatives and other additives in the food.
- ❖ **CAUTION:** *Some ingredients (like canola oil, soybean oil and sucralose) were not viewed by this research team as being unfavorable; therefore, some products that contain these ingredients are given higher scores than might be justified.*
- ❖ **ACTION STEP:**
 - Try looking up a few of your favorite processed foods; see what score the food is given.
 - Are there recommendations that receive a better score that you would like to try?

MINIMALLY PROCESSED VS ULTRA PROCESSED

Remember, there is a difference between *minimally processed foods* (like riced cauliflower, with only one or two ingredients) versus *ultra processed foods*. It is the category of ultra processed items that we are really wanting to crack down on.

WAYS TO RECOGNIZE ULTRA PROCESSED FOODS

- Longer ingredient list; may contain one or more ingredients you cannot pronounce
- Contain lots more sugar, salt and other intense flavors (which make them addictive)
- Contain preservatives, food dyes and other chemicals/ingredients not commonly used in the home kitchen

ACTION STEPS:

- Check labels on foods you use often. How many ingredients do you see? If it is more than 5 or 6 ingredients, try to find a replacement with less.
- As you read through the ingredients, do you notice any words you cannot pronounce? Are these things that you also wouldn't cook with at home?
- Aim to eat more home-cooked meals; this provides much better control of ingredients.
- Find recipes you can cook pretty easily and that you enjoy. Focus on ones that are tasty, affordable and accessible; this will encourage you to stay on track with cooking them!

RECIPE SOURCES:

- Find recipes @ www.directaccess.md on the HEAL (Healthy Eating and Lifestyle) page.
- Also check out some reputable websites using this tool: [Julie's Favorite Recipe Websites](#).

"Real food is what the world ate for millennia without risk of long-term disease" -Robert Lustig

Examples that remove/replace more processed items:

- Replace boxed breakfast cereal and cereal bars with long-cooking oats or a couple of eggs, an omelet or low-carb casserole. Cottage cheese and Greek yogurt are also good options.
- Check the label on your coffee creamer; creamers are often loaded with ingredients, including sucralose. See [Best Choices for Beverages](#) for some options.
- Skip breakfast (the simplest solution!) and wait until lunch to eat (intermittent fasting).
- Try a lettuce wrap rather than using bread for your sandwich. It's unbelievable how many ingredients are in a simple piece of bread!
- Enjoy your sandwich/burger but skip the chips or French fries; replace with fresh veggies, if you need something else to crunch on.
- Have a salad for a simple lunch or dinner. Use a large base of greens and other veggies; top with your favorite [protein](#). Consider making a simple vinaigrette dressing using olive oil and vinegar. Check out [Sauces, Condiments and Dressings](#) for recipes.
- Skip the basket of tortilla chips at the Mexican restaurant; it's easy to load up on 500+ calories of empty calories before your meal ever shows up!
- For popcorn, try getting a bag of popping corn and pop it on the stovetop with some coconut oil and/or real butter.
- Cooking oils are a processed food ([NOVA system](#), see category #2). The least processed oils include coconut, olive and avocado oils. Highly processed ones include soybean, canola, sunflower, safflower, and other seed oils. See [Healthy Fat Options](#) for best ones.
- Salad dressing and mayo usually contain soybean oil; look for alternatives that use less processed oils. Again, see [Healthy Fat Options](#) for best ones.
- Crackers, chips and all manner of items are available that may be manufactured with slightly more favorable ingredients. You will have to be the judge of whether these are worth the extra expense. And be careful - sometimes their "healthier oil" is still a highly processed one! Also check to see how many ingredients are in it and if these are ones you might use at home.
- Explore recipes with pasta alternatives (zucchini noodles, spaghetti squash, cabbage noodles); you might be surprised at how tasty these can be. See [Carb Swaps](#) for ideas.
- Compare different brands of ready-to-eat meals (you might want to use the [TRUE FOOD tool](#) to help. Look for the least processed versions - or try making your own version of the meal yourself. [Meal Prep](#) uses this strategy.
- Note that alcohol (including wine) is processed too! Most wine doesn't have a label on it, but the number of [ingredients](#) in a bottle may surprise you. Same goes for beer and spirits.
- Try a very simple dessert of Greek yogurt with some warmed berries on top. I like to keep a bag of berries in the freezer for this purpose - so tasty when warmed up!!