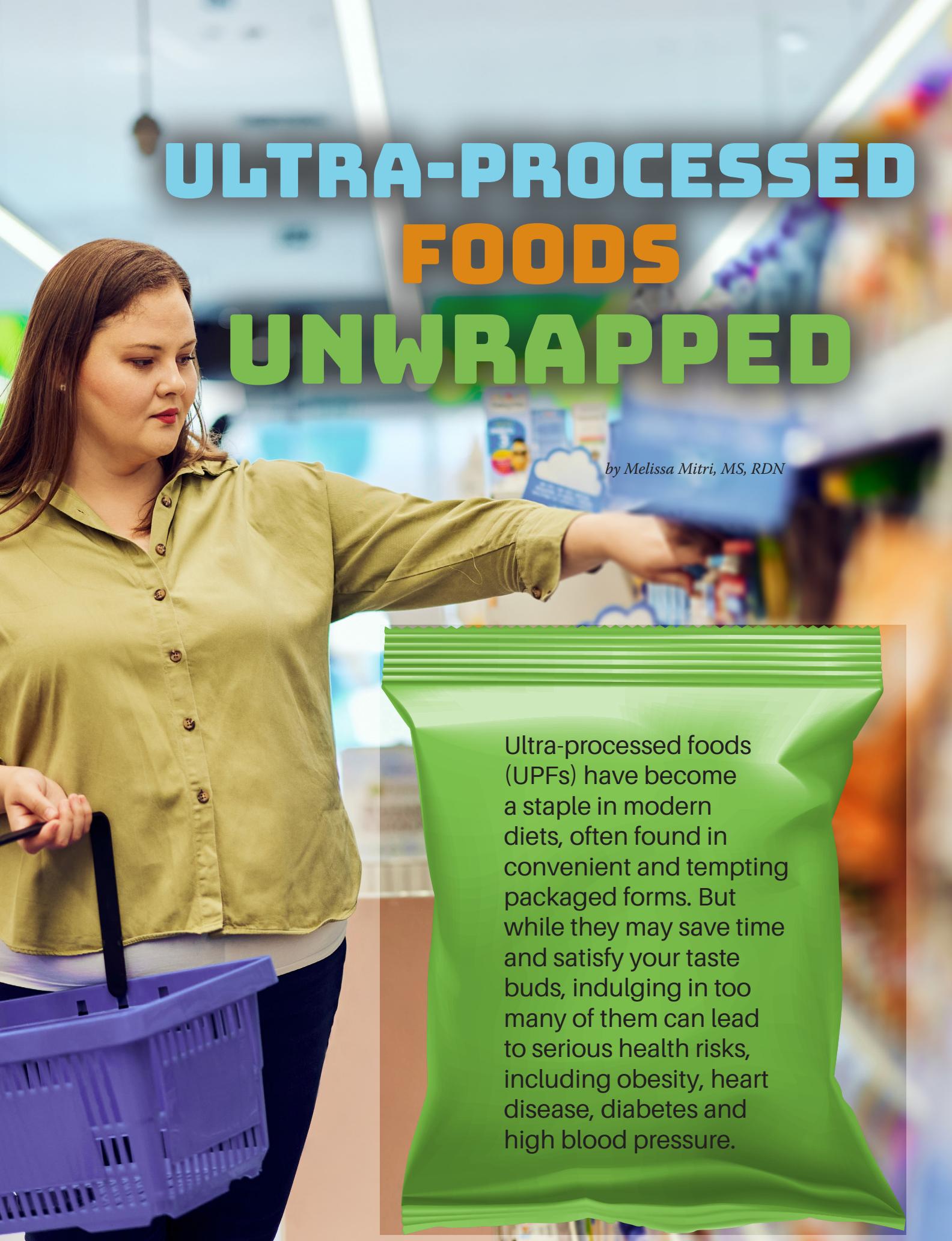


ULTRA-PROCESSED FOODS UNWRAPPED

by Melissa Mitri, MS, RDN



Ultra-processed foods (UPFs) have become a staple in modern diets, often found in convenient and tempting packaged forms. But while they may save time and satisfy your taste buds, indulging in too many of them can lead to serious health risks, including obesity, heart disease, diabetes and high blood pressure.

Though UPFs may start from whole foods, they are packed with added ingredients like oils, sugars, artificial colors, flavors and preservatives that enhance taste, appearance and shelf life. The downside? These foods are usually high in calories, unhealthy fats and sodium while offering little in the way of nutrients or fiber.

This article will take a closer look at ultra-processed foods, how to spot them and simple strategies to cut back for better health and weight management.

COMMON EXAMPLES OF ULTRA-PROCESSED FOODS

It can be confusing to know what counts as a UPF. Here are some common examples:

- Sugary breakfast cereals and bars
- Packaged snacks and sweets
- Instant noodles and soups
- Frozen and ready-to-eat meals
- Processed meats
- Packaged baked goods
- Sweetened and flavored dairy products
- Fast food items
- Processed cheese products
- Artificially flavored snacks
- Packaged instant desserts
- Condiments and sauces
- Sugary soft drinks, energy drinks and sports drinks
- Sweetened coffee and tea beverages
- Packaged fruit juices and sweetened milk drinks
- Alcoholic beverages

Not every food in these categories is ultra-processed, so it's essential to check the ingredient lists. Look for added sugars, fats, artificial flavors and preservatives to understand how processed the food is.



NOVA CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM FOR PROCESSED FOODS

Almost all foods undergo some level of processing, but not all processing is cause for concern. For example, frozen vegetables are flash-frozen at peak ripeness, preserving their nutrients.

To help make sense of the different levels of food processing, the NOVA classification system was created by Brazilian nutrition expert Carlos Monteiro. It breaks foods into four groups based on their processing level:

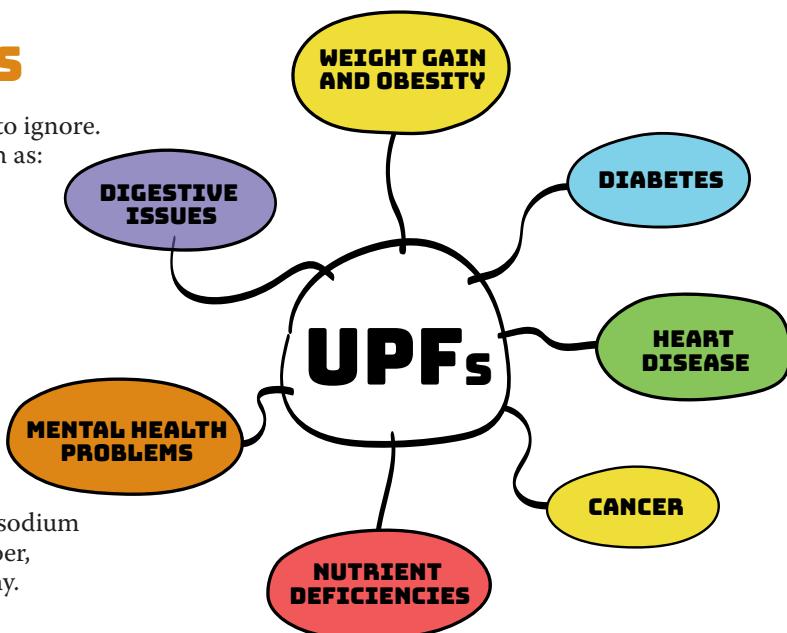
GROUP 1	GROUP 2	GROUP 3	GROUP 4
<p>Unprocessed or minimally processed food</p> <p>Whole foods that are the best for your diet. The majority of your food should come from this group.</p> 	<p>Foods processed in the kitchen to extend shelf life</p> <p>Culinary ingredients like plant oils, butter, sugar, salt, starch and honey used in cooking.</p> 	<p>Processed foods with few ingredients</p> <p>Foods like bread and jam that combine Group 1 and Group 2 ingredients.</p> 	<p>Ultra-processed foods with additives</p> <p>Foods with added chemicals not usually found in kitchens, such as mechanically separated meat. These should be limited as much as possible.</p> 

HEALTH RISKS OF ULTRA-PROCESSED FOODS

The health risks linked to ultra-processed foods are hard to ignore. Eating too many can lead to serious health problems, such as:

- Weight gain and obesity
- Diabetes
- Heart disease
- Digestive issues
- Cancer
- Mental health problems
- Nutrient deficiencies

UPFs are often loaded with added sugars, unhealthy fats, sodium and extra calories, but they lack essential nutrients like fiber, vitamins and minerals that your body needs to stay healthy.



WHY ARE ULTRA-PROCESSED FOODS SO POPULAR?

Despite their known health risks, ultra-processed foods are popular because they're:

- **Convenient:** Quick and easy to prepare, saving time and effort in the kitchen.
- **Tasty:** Engineered for flavor with the perfect mix of fats, sugars and salts, making them hard to resist. Struggling with portion control? It's no accident!
- **Widely available and marketed:** They're always within reach.
- **Long-lasting:** Fewer trips to the store and less food spoilage.
- **Affordable:** Often cheaper than fresh, whole foods.

These factors make ultra-processed foods a popular choice, despite the health risks.

HOW TO SPOT ULTRA-PROCESSED FOODS

To identify ultra-processed foods, keep an eye out for these tell-tale signs:

- **High in added sugars or fats:** Ingredients like high-fructose corn syrup, hydrogenated oils or artificial sweeteners.
- **Packaging:** Often comes in colorful, attractive packaging
- **Loaded with preservatives:** Additives like preservatives, flavor enhancers (MSG), colorings and emulsifiers (guar gum, carrageenan).
- **Ready-to-eat or heat:** Foods like instant noodles, frozen meals and snack foods.

By checking for these characteristics, you can better distinguish ultra-processed foods from minimally processed options and make healthier choices.



TIPS FOR REDUCING ULTRA-PROCESSED FOOD INTAKE

Cutting back on UPFs is easier than you might think. Here are some simple tips:



Swap Sugary Beverages for Water

Sugary drinks like soda, sweetened teas and energy drinks are loaded with empty calories that offer no nutritional benefits and contribute to weight gain. Instead, try calorie-free options like plain, sparkling or flavored water. Try to drink at least eight glasses of water daily, and keep a reusable bottle handy to stay hydrated throughout the day.



Plan and Prep Your Meals

Meal planning and preparation can help you avoid the temptation of ultra-processed convenience foods. Try batch-cooking proteins and grains, or washing and chopping fruits and vegetables in advance. Having healthy options ready to go makes it easier to stick to your goals on busy days.



Keep Whole-Food Snacks on Hand

Swap ultra-processed snacks like chips and cookies for whole-food alternatives that provide nutrients and keep you satisfied. Great options include nuts and seeds, trail mix, fresh fruit, veggies with hummus or whole-grain crackers with peanut butter. These snacks are naturally filling, making them harder to overeat.



Take it Slow

Instead of overhauling your diet overnight, start by cutting out one or two ultra-processed foods at a time. Once you've gotten used to those changes, move on to the next. Gradually replacing these foods with whole-food options will make the transition smoother and more sustainable.



Make Your Own Versions of Processed Foods

Homemade versions of processed foods allow you to control the ingredients and reduce added sugars, sodium and preservatives. For example, instead of buying store-bought dressings or dips, whip up your own using fresh, simple ingredients.



Go for Whole Grains

Processed grains, like white flour, are often stripped of nutrients. Choose whole grains such as whole wheat, brown rice or quinoa, which retain their fiber, vitamins and minerals—offering a more nutritious base for your meals.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Ultra-processed foods have become a big part of modern diets due to their convenience, taste and affordability. But beneath the surface, they're often packed with unhealthy ingredients that can increase the risk of health problems. By reducing your intake of UPFs and choosing more whole, minimally processed foods, you can improve your health in the long run. Small, gradual changes can make a big difference in how you feel and live.

About the Author:

Melissa Mitri, MS, RDN, is a Registered Dietitian, weight-loss expert and freelance writer. In her virtual weight-loss practice, Melissa helps clients develop small habit changes that make a big long-term impact. She writes for publications like Everyday Health and Eat This, Not That!, and is a frequently sought-after nutrition expert for major media outlets.



Obesity Action Coalition

ABOUT THE OBESITY ACTION COALITION (OAC)

The Obesity Action Coalition (OAC) is a National non-profit organization dedicated to giving a voice to individuals affected by obesity and helping them along their journey toward better health. Our core focuses are to elevate the conversation of weight and its impact on health, improve access to obesity care, provide science-based education on obesity and its treatments, and fight to eliminate weight bias and discrimination.



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The OAC knows that the journey with weight can be challenging but we also know that great things happen when we learn, connect and engage. That is why the OAC Community exists. Our Community is designed to provide quality education, ongoing support programs, an opportunity to connect, and a place to take action on important issues.

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- Community Discussion Forum
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