

- Freeze dried-foods

How to suss out everyday ultraprocessed foods

“Ultraprocessed foods” are known to be unhealthy, but how do we spot these, ask Australian researchers at Deakin University. 8 foods you might not realise are ultraprocessed

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FOR years, the term “junk food” has been used to refer to foods considered bad for you, and not very nutritious. But junk can mean different things to different people.



Official dietary guidelines have used more palatable terms such as “discretionary foods”, “sometimes foods” and “foods high in sugar, salt and fat”. But these labels haven’t always made the task of identifying nutritious foods much easier. After all, many fresh fruits are high in sugar and some salad vegetables are low in nutrients — but that doesn’t make them unhealthy. And food products such as soft drinks with “no added sugar” and muesli bars fortified with nutrient additives aren’t necessarily healthy.

In 2009, experts proposed using the extent and purpose of industrial food processing as a key indicator of nutrition problems.

The theory acknowledged some food processing helps make foods more convenient, safer and tastier. But it also nominated a class of foods — called “ultraprocessed foods” — as unhealthy, based on more than the content of salt, fat and sugar.

A large body of evidence now shows ultraprocessed food consumption is associated with poorer human health (including rates of heart diseases, diabetes and obesity) and planetary health (plastic pollution, excessive energy, land use and biodiversity loss).

But how can you spot those foods when you’re planning what to buy or eat?

What counts as an ultraprocessed food?

Ultraprocessed foods are made using industrial processing methods and contain ingredients you wouldn’t usually find in your home pantry.

Processing methods used may include extrusion, moulding, chemical modification and hydrogenation (which can turn liquid unsaturated fat into a more solid form). But manufacturers don’t need to state the processes foods undergo on the label, so it can be challenging to identify ultraprocessed foods. The best place to start is the ingredients list.

There are two types of ingredients that classify ultraprocessed foods: industrial food substances and cosmetic additives. Food substances include processed versions of protein and fibre (such as whey powder or inulin), maltodextrin (an intensely processed carbohydrate), fructose or glucose syrups and hydrogenated oils.

Cosmetic additives are used to improve the texture, taste or colour of foods. They make ultraprocessed foods more attractive and irresistibly tasty (contributing to their overconsumption). Examples are colours and flavours (including those listed as “natural”), noncaloric sweeteners (including stevia), flavour enhancers (such as yeast extract and MSG), and thickeners and emulsifiers (which modify a food’s texture).

But are all ultraprocessed foods bad?

Some types of ultraprocessed foods may look healthier than others, having fewer industrial ingredients or being lower in sugar. But these are not necessarily less harmful to our health. We know Australians consume up to 42% of their energy from ultraprocessed foods and the cumulative effect of industrial ingredients over the whole diet is unknown.

Also, when you consume an ultraprocessed food, you may be displacing a nutritious fresh food or dish from your diet. So, reducing ultraprocessed foods as much as possible is a way to move to a healthier and more sustainable diet. Though not exhaustive, there are online databases that rate specific products to guide food choices.

Supermarkets are dominated by ultraprocessed foods, so it can be difficult to avoid them entirely. And sometimes choices are limited by availability, allergies or dietary intolerance. We can all make positive changes to our diet by choosing less processed foods. But governments can also legislate to make minimally processed foods more available and affordable, while discouraging the purchase and consumption of ultraprocessed foods.

— The Conversation

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Ultraprocessed is not just another name for junk — although foods such as soft drinks, confectionery and chips are ultraprocessed. There are many packaged foods we'd normally consider healthy that are ultraprocessed.

1. Breakfast cereals

Many cereals and breakfast drinks marketed as healthy are ultraprocessed. They can contain maltodextrins, processed proteins and fibres, and colours. Oats, on the other hand, contain just one ingredient: oats.

Despite the healthy hype, many of these are ultraprocessed, containing processed fibres and proteins, invert sugars (sugars modified through an industrial process) and noncaloric sweeteners.

Many dairy alternatives contain emulsifiers, vegetable gums and flavours. Not all brands are ultraprocessed so check the ingredients list. Some soy milks only contain water, soybeans, oil and salt.

Some packaged breads contain emulsifiers, modified starches (starches altered through industrial methods) and vegetable gums — they're usually the plastic wrapped, sliced and cheaper breads. Fresh bakery breads, on the other hand, are rarely ultraprocessed.

Flavoured yoghurts often contain additives like thickeners, noncaloric sweeteners or flavours. Choose plain yoghurts instead.

Preprepared pasta and stirfry sauces typically contain ingredients such as thickeners, flavour enhancers and colours. But simple sauces you can make at home with ingredients like canned tomatoes, vegetables, garlic and herbs are minimally processed.

Packaged cold meats may have emulsifiers, modified starches, thickeners and added fibres — making them ultraprocessed. Replace packaged processed meats with alternatives such as cold roast meats or chicken instead.

The way margarines and nondairy spreads are made (by hydrogenating the vegetable oils) and the additives they contain, such as emulsifiers and colours, make them an ultraprocessed food — unlike butter, which is essentially cream and some salt.