

Unpacking Ultra-Processed Foods: Are They Our Dietary Foe?



Ultra-processed foods (UPFs) have recently taken centre stage in the nutrition conversation. You've probably come across some rather sensational headlines and heard influencers passionately advocating for a complete ban on UPFs. But let's take a more measured approach. Not all UPFs are created equal, and there's a nuanced story to tell. Let's explore what you need to know about ultra-processed foods.

Navigating the World of UPFs

UPFs have been making waves, and there's mounting evidence suggesting a connection to health concerns. In the UK, UPFs make up a significant 60% of our dietary intake [1], prompting us to reconsider our eating habits. However, it's essential to remember that not all food processing is detrimental. Some processes, such as pasteurisation, fortification, and fermentation, can genuinely enhance the nutritional quality of our foods.

Understand Ultra-Processed Foods

Now, what exactly constitutes a UPF? These are foods that undergo an array of industrial processes and typically boast more than five ingredients, including components like fat, sugar, salt, preservatives, emulsifiers, sweeteners, and artificial flavours [2]. It's a broad category, encompassing everything from the bacon-flavoured crisps and frankfurters to pantry staples like wholemeal bread and plant-based milks.

Untangling Health Concerns

A high consumption of UPFs has been linked to health issues like obesity, type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, specific cancers, and even overall mortality rates [3,4,5]. But, here's the catch – correlation doesn't necessarily imply causation. And for the moment we are not clear on what might be the mechanisms at play: is it because the food structure gets broken? Does it change our appetite regulation? Is the presence of some specific additives such as emulsifiers, artificial flavouring, thickening agents? There are a lot of theories floating around but few answers yet.

One thing's for sure: not all UPFs are created equal in terms of health impact. While some, like sugary snacks and processed meats, come packed with calories, fat, salt, and sugar, others offer valuable nutrients. Think whole-grain cereals and fortified plant-based milks – they fall under the UPF category but bring essential nutrients to the table, often lacking in our western diet, including fibre, B vitamins, vitamin D, and iron.

Striking a Dietary Balance

The key takeaway is that while it's prudent to limit UPF consumption, you don't necessarily have to bid farewell to UPFs entirely. It's about finding balance. A good rule of thumb is the 80:20 approach – aim to consume non-UPFs for most of your meals while keeping an allowance for occasional UPFs, especially when life gets hectic.

To sum it up

There's no need to demonise all ultra-processed foods, although attention to the details is a good idea. By making informed choices, understanding ingredient labels, and considering our overall diet, UPFs can coexist with whole, nutritious foods, enabling us to enjoy a diverse and satisfying diet without unnecessary stress.

If you need guidance to ensure your diet supports you in living your healthiest life, come and meet **our nutritionist, Clemence Cleave**. clem@rocketfuelwellbeing.com

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