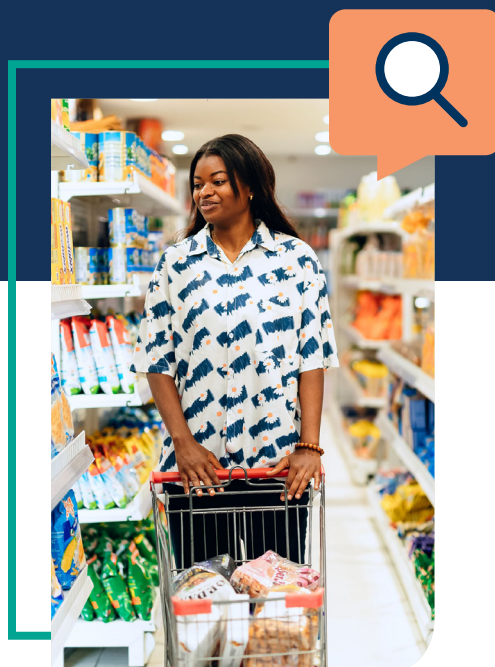


# Processing the Facts about Ultra-processed Foods

How many steps does it take for food to land on your table? It depends on the food. Most items in the grocery store go through some form of food processing, whether they are washed, frozen, cooked, canned, or packaged.

Minimal food processing can include pasteurizing milk to kill bacteria, freezing fruit to preserve shelf life, or creating baby carrots from large carrots for convenience. But, some foods go through extensive processing to enhance flavor, texture, and shelf-life, and by the end, they contain few or no whole-food ingredients. These are ultra-processed foods (UPF). They are cheap to produce and often widely available at the grocery store.

People in the United States consume large amounts of UPFs — approximately 55% of their daily calories — which poses significant public health concerns.



**Unprocessed or minimally processed foods** are altered to remove unwanted or inedible parts, like stems or leaves. This process does not add substances to the original food. These whole foods keep their natural form, though they may have been dried, frozen, or pasteurized to extend shelf life without added salt, sugar, or oil.



**Processed foods** include the addition of oil, salt, or sugar through canning, pickling, smoking, curing, or fermentation. They typically contain only two or three ingredients and retain their recognizable original form.



**Ultra-processed foods (UPFs)** are foods made mostly from processed ingredients rather than whole foods. They typically contain five or more ingredients and have undergone extensive processing during manufacturing. Many contain additives such as flavors, colors, sweeteners, or preservatives that are not commonly used in home cooking.

# Characteristics of Ultra-processed Foods

The United States has one of the highest levels of UPF consumption in the world, posing a significant risk to public health. Many studies have found that UPFs are linked to increased risk of adverse health outcomes such as heart disease, type 2 diabetes, obesity, depression, and anxiety, among others.

Identifying UPFs is the first step in making healthier choices. The following chart outlines some of their most common characteristics.

| UPFs Most Common Characteristics                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|    | Contain ingredients that are often hard to recognize or pronounce, like ingredients designed to enhance a product's appearance or taste (flavors, colors, sweeteners), additives, and preservatives |
|    | Usually are high in added sugar, sodium, or saturated fats                                                                                                                                          |
|   | Tend to be high in calories and low in nutrients per serving                                                                                                                                        |
|  | Engineered to make you want to eat more                                                                                                                                                             |
|  | Use sophisticated packaging, usually with non-natural materials like plastic bags or wrapping                                                                                                       |
|  | Highly profitable because of low-cost ingredients and long shelf life                                                                                                                               |
|  | Low cost for consumers                                                                                                                                                                              |
|  | <u>More heavily marketed than other types of foods</u> , with prominent branding                                                                                                                    |

## Addicted to Ultra-processed Foods

Food and beverage companies have designed UPFs **not** to make you feel full, but to make you want to eat more. Some people may experience feeling “addicted” to UPFs, because many of them have the following characteristics:

- **Mood-boosting:** UPFs can replicate feelings of euphoria and enjoyment. They can also increase the “feel-good” hormone, dopamine, similar to the degree of nicotine in cigarettes.
- **Reinforcing:** UPFs can stimulate your brain in a way that increases your desire to eat out of habit rather than out of hunger.
- **Craving:** Because of the mood-boosting and reinforcing effects, craving UPFs is a common sensation, even when you are full.

## Choosing Healthy Foods for You and Your Family

Choosing the best food for you and your family may rely on a combination of health factors, costs, and convenience. Here are a few tips to keep in mind when swapping ultra-processed food for healthier choices.

- Try shopping at the edges of the grocery store. This is where fresh fruits, vegetables, dairy products, meats/protein sources, and whole grains are typically placed, and these products are often the least processed. Products in the middle of the store, such as those with long shelf lives or those heavily marketed at the end of an aisle, are more likely to be ultra-processed.
- Frozen fruits or vegetables with no added ingredients are just as healthy as fresh produce. Fruits canned in water or 100% juice or reduced-sodium canned vegetables are minimally processed foods (not UPFs) and can be part of a healthy diet.
- Unprocessed or minimally processed foods are important for everyone, but especially important for young children who are still growing. Some baby products are also enriched or fortified to increase age-appropriate nutritional value. For example, infant formula is not a UPF, but many toddler snack products are. Talk to your child’s pediatrician or your healthcare provider for more information.
- Reducing consumption of UPFs is important, however, it’s not the only thing you should consider when grocery shopping. Check nutrition labels to help limit saturated fat, sodium, and added sugars. For example, plain potato chips are not a UPF by definition, but are high in calories, saturated fat, and sodium.



This resource is a collaboration between the Public Health Communications Collaborative and Healthy Eating Research. For more information on healthy eating, check out [A Snapshot of Dietary Guidelines \(DGA\) for Americans](#) or visit [HealthyEatingResearch.org](https://HealthyEatingResearch.org)