



# Processed and Ultra-Processed Foods - Are they slowly killing us?

By Dr. Tricia Talerico, D.C., M.S., Nutr.

According to the Department of Agriculture, processed foods are any raw agricultural commodities that have been washed, cleaned, milled, cut, chopped, heated, pasteurized, blanched, cooked, canned, frozen, dried, dehydrated, mixed or packaged. Basically, a process that alters a food's natural state. Now, let's talk about the difference between processed and ultra-processed foods. An easy analogy is to look at processed foods as a spectrum. At one end of the spectrum are unprocessed or minimally processed foods like apples or oats. In the middle of the spectrum are processed foods that have a few added ingredients but still "look" like whole food ingredients. These would be canned vegetables, freshly baked breads and pasteurized milk. At the other end of the spectrum are ultra-processed foods or "junk food." These foods are so far removed from whole foods and are often referred to as "food-based products." They may be made from substances extracted from foods or synthesized in laboratories. Basically, they are "industrial creations." These ultra-processed foods are generally packed with additives like oil, fat, sugar, starch, proteins, artificial colors and sodium. They are basically stripped of all nutrients that we need to be healthy.

These ultra-processed foods are linked to 32 damaging outcomes including weight gain, heart disease (50% increased risk), dementia, depression (22% increased risk), type 2 diabetes (12% increased risk) and cancer. Evidence now indicates that higher ultra-processed food intake is associated with a 21% greater risk of death from any cause. Just a few of the foods that are commonly consumed include deli meats, hot dogs, sausage, frozen meals, frozen pizzas, packaged snacks like

chips, cookies, crackers and baked goods, most breakfast cereals, canned/instant soups and even ice cream. Beverages can also be processed or ultra-processed. This would include energy drinks and sodas, pre-made sweetened coffee drinks and juices and, yes, alcoholic drinks.

So, why are we so drawn to these ultra-processed foods? These foods are generally less expensive than fresh fruits and vegetables. Their ingredients are cleverly manipulated to appeal to common cravings, ie. craving for sweetness or saltiness. How many contests has Doritos had to introduce new flavors created by public opinion? Doritos Triangle Tryout, Doritos Sweet & Tangy BBQ Challenge, etc. Naturally we would want to buy a food that we helped to create. Right? These ultra-processed foods are also loaded with ingredients to enhance shelf life and are extremely calorie-dense. Recent data shows that 57% of caloric intake of adults comes from ultra-processed foods and, sadly, 67% of children's daily calories is from ultra-processed foods.

So, what do we do about this nutrition crisis? First, we need to understand that many foods are cleverly marketed to make us think they are healthy. If the list of ingredients contains things you cannot identify or pronounce or would be more familiar in a chemistry lab, it's probably ultra-processed. Second, preparing or cooking foods at home is always best. So, buy things like fresh fruits and vegetables, dried beans, intact whole grains and then prepare them at home. Third, shop the perimeter of the grocery store to find whole, fresh fruits and vegetables and healthy proteins. It's best to focus predominantly on buying whole foods that don't have labels and maybe a few carefully selected packaged foods that contain mostly single whole food ingredients. It's not practical to initially eliminate every ultra-processed or processed food. Make small changes that would be most beneficial to your health and a healthy body composition. Maybe pick a few hours one day a week where you can do some easy meal preparation? **YOU CAN DO THIS!**

**IMPROVE YOUR HEALTH... IMPROVE YOUR LIFE!**



**Tricia Talerico, D.C., M.S., Nutr.**  
**Nutrition and Weight Loss Center of Ocean**  
 Dow Plaza • 1819 Highway 35 North  
 Oakhurst, NJ 07755  
**732-609-3366**  
[www.nutritionandweightlosscenter.com](http://www.nutritionandweightlosscenter.com)





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