

Look for these 9 red flags to identify food that is ultra-processed

In Day 2 of our New Year's Tuneup, free yourself from the grip of ultra-processed food by looking for these signs on the package label



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How to spot ultra-processed foods and get them out of your diet for good. (Linnea Bullion for The Washington Post)

To improve your eating habits this year, you don't need to count calories or carbs. Instead, focus on how much your food has been processed before it gets to your dinner table.

If you're like most people, you eat a lot of ultra-processed foods and don't even realize it. Many of these foods — protein and granola bars, low-fat yogurts and breakfast cereals — sound like healthful choices.

But ultra-processed foods are formulations of industrial ingredients that are designed by manufacturers to achieve a certain “bliss point,” which causes us to crave and overeat them. Ultra-processed foods make up a majority of the

calories most people consume, and scientists say they are a driving force behind the multiple diet-related illnesses that are shortening our life spans.

“Empowering yourself with the knowledge of what you’re about to eat or what you’re about to feed your family is critical,” said Nicole Avena, a visiting professor of health psychology at Princeton University.

So how can you free yourself from the grip of ultra-processed foods? Start by reading the labels on the foods in your fridge, pantry and the grocery aisle. We’ve created a simple guide to help you spot nine red flags that signal a food probably is ultra-processed.

More than three ingredients

Many ultra-processed foods have long lists of ingredients that can sound like a high school chemistry experiment. If you like bread, for instance, choose a brand that contains only simple ingredients, such as wheat flour, barley flour, sourdough starter, salt, nuts or raisins. Many ultra-processed breads contain sugar, vegetable oil, artificial sweeteners, and multiple preservatives, emulsifiers and shelf-life extenders such as sorbic acid, calcium propionate, datem, and monoglycerides.

“You can still buy the foods you want,” said Stephen Devries, an adjunct associate professor of nutrition at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and the executive director of the educational nonprofit Gaples Institute. “But you should find the least-altered version of those foods with the fewest ingredients possible.”

Thickeners, stabilizers or emulsifiers

Look for ingredients such as soy lecithin, guar gum, xanthan gum, carrageenan, mono- and diglycerides, or carboxymethylcellulose. Ultra-processed foods often contain dyes to make them look appealing, preservatives to give them a long shelf life, and thickeners, stabilizers and emulsifiers to improve their texture or to keep their ingredients from separating as they sit on store shelves for weeks or months at a time.

Added sugars and sweeteners

Try to avoid foods with corn syrup, cane sugar, malt syrup or molasses on the label. If you want extra sweetness, add your own sugar or honey.

“Most people would add less honey or sugar than you will find in the packaged versions,” said Devries. “That’s much healthier than relying on the yogurt company to determine how much sugar or honey or additives you should eat.”

Ingredients that end in ‘-ose’

Examine the label for sucrose, maltose, dextrose, fructose or glucose. These are other names for added sugars.

Artificial or ‘fake’ sugars

Look for aspartame, sucralose, acesulfame-k, saccharin or stevia. Sweeteners and artificial flavors are another hallmark of ultra-processed foods. Sugar and sweeteners often are added “to mask the off-putting taste from the preservatives and other ingredients that are added in,” said Avena, author of the new book “Sugarless.”

Many store-bought English muffins, for instance, contain an array of emulsifiers, preservatives and sweeteners. But you wouldn’t know that unless you looked at the ingredients. “They don’t taste sweet and yet they have added sugar,” said Avena.

Spot the artificial sweeteners in these common grocery store items

Health claims

Ultra-processed foods often have buzzy marketing claims on their packages. Many products that are marketed as nutritious are actually laden with sweeteners and other additives. These products include breakfast cereals, granola, flavored yogurt, snack bars, salad dressings and canned soups.

Low-sugar promises

Does the label say that the product is low in added sugar? That can be a red flag, because manufacturers often replace the added sugar in their products with artificial sweeteners.

Instant and flavored varieties

“When it’s instant, it’s usually mechanically altered in a way that degrades it,” said Devries. If you like oatmeal for breakfast, buy the product that has only oats in it and nothing else.

Don't be tempted by foods offered in a variety of fruity or other flavors. If you like fruit-flavored yogurt, buy plain yogurt and add your own fresh fruit. Many fruit-flavored yogurts contain not just fruit but several other additives such as cane sugar, cornstarch, "natural flavors" and juice concentrates. Yogurt should have just two ingredients: Milk and cultures (i.e. probiotics).

Could you make it in your kitchen?

When in doubt, look at the ingredient label and ask yourself whether you could make it at home. **Ultra-processed foods** contain additives that are not typically used in home kitchens. They are often transformed into textures and shapes not found in nature — things like frosted cereals, doughnuts, hot dogs and chicken nuggets.

To be sure, you don't have to avoid all processed foods. Instead, think of food processing as a spectrum, ranging from *minimally* processed foods all the way to *ultra*-processed foods. **Minimally processed foods** come from plants or animals with minimal alteration. Think whole grains, vegetables, eggs, milk and meat. **Processed culinary ingredients** are used to cook and season food in homes and restaurants. They include butter, sugar, spices, salt, and olive oil.

Processed foods include items such as canned vegetables, bacon, cheeses, smoked fish, canned tuna and freshly made breads. Most processed foods are things you can make in your own kitchen. They typically contain two or three ingredients, but they're still recognizable as versions of things found in nature. Some examples would be a jar of unsweetened apple sauce, tofu, hummus, tomato sauce, and frozen fruits and vegetables.

Most ultra-processed foods are found in the middle aisles of a grocery store. Shop the perimeter where stores stock fresh, whole foods, said Albert-Laszlo Barabasi, a professor at Northeastern University and a lecturer at Harvard Medical School who studies ultra-processed foods. "Most of the foods that are fresh are good for you," he said.

If you choose to buy ultra-processed foods, avoid "family size" and choose single serving items. Large packages are designed to make you overeat, said Marion Nestle, an emeritus professor of nutrition, food studies and public health at New York University and the author of "Soda Politics." "If you can't stop eating from big packages, don't buy them," she added.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/wellness/2024/01/02/ultra-processed-foods-identification/>