

Practical Suggestions for Patients to Reduce Ultra-Processed Foods

1. Start With Small, Doable Swaps

Patients don't need a perfect diet—just better choices.

- Replace soda with water, sparkling water, or unsweetened tea.
 - Swap chips or candy for nuts, fruit, or yogurt.
 - Choose whole-grain bread instead of white, when possible.
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2. Use the “5-Ingredient Rule of Thumb”

Tell patients:

“If a product has a long ingredient list—especially things you don't recognize—it's probably ultra-processed.”

Encourage choosing foods with **5 ingredients or fewer**, when practical.

3. Avoid Foods With These Clues

Help patients identify UPFs quickly:

- Ingredients ending in **-ose** (glucose, fructose, maltose).
 - **Hydrogenated oils** or trans fats.
 - **Artificial colors** (Red 40, Yellow 5, etc.).
 - **Emulsifiers**: polysorbate-80, carboxymethylcellulose.
 - **Flavor enhancers**: MSG, “natural flavors.”
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4. Focus on Adding, Not Restricting

Restricting feels punishing; adding feels achievable.

Encourage increasing:

- Fruits & vegetables

- Whole grains
- Lean proteins
- Beans, lentils, nuts
- Water and unsweetened beverages

As whole foods increase, UPFs naturally decrease.

5. Plan Ahead to Avoid “Emergency Eating”

Most UPF consumption comes from convenience eating.

Teach patients to prepare:

- Pre-cut vegetables
- Pre-washed lettuce
- Hard-boiled eggs
- Pre-portioned nuts
- Ready-to-eat fruit

Having healthier options ready reduces impulse choices.

6. Be Cautious With “Health-Washing” Labels

Patients often assume:

- “High protein”
- “Low fat”
- “Plant-based”
- “Whole grain”
- “Fortified with vitamins”

...means healthy.

Explain that these labels commonly appear on ultra-processed items disguised as healthy foods.

7. Use the 80/20 Approach

A realistic approach:

“Aim for whole foods 80% of the time. The other 20% can include convenience foods.”

This reduces guilt and increases adherence.

8. Reduce Sugary Beverages First

This is the **single biggest improvement** for most patients.

Encourage switching gradually:

- Regular soda → diet soda → flavored seltzer
 - Sweetened tea → unsweetened tea with lemon
 - Fancy coffee drinks → simple coffee with a splash of milk
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9. Cook at Home Once More Per Week

Even one additional home-cooked meal weekly:

- Lowers processed intake
 - Increases nutrient quality
 - Improves long-term habits
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10. Shop the Perimeter of the Grocery Store

Simple advice:

“Most whole foods are found around the outer walls of the grocery store.”

This helps patients avoid the processed-food aisles.

11. Mind Portion Sizes for Ultra-Processed Foods

If patients still want UPFs:

- Buy smaller packages
- Avoid “family size” items
- Pre-portion snacks
- Don’t eat out of the bag

Summary Recommendation for Patients

“Aim for foods that look close to how they came out of the ground. The fewer steps between farm and your plate, the healthier the food tends to be.”