

Ultra-Processed Foods & Poor Nutrition

Quick Reference Handout

What Are Ultra-Processed Foods (UPFs)?

Ultra-processed foods are packaged products made with industrial ingredients such as refined starches, added sugars, flavor enhancers, emulsifiers, preservatives, and artificial colors. Examples: sugary drinks, fast food, packaged snacks, breakfast cereals, instant noodles, frozen meals, processed meats, energy bars.

How Ultra-Processed Foods Harm Nutrition

1. Low Nutrient Density

- High calories but low in vitamins, minerals, and fiber.
 - Fill you up without nourishing your body.
-

2. Too Much Added Sugar

- Drives weight gain, insulin spikes, and fatty liver disease.
 - Common in drinks, cereals, yogurts, sauces, and snacks.
-

3. Excess Sodium

- Found in soups, frozen meals, processed meats, chips.
 - Increases blood pressure and cardiovascular risk.
-

4. Unhealthy Fats

- Many UPFs contain refined oils and trans fats.
 - Promotes inflammation and metabolic disease.
-

5. Highly Refined Carbs

- Quickly digested → rapid spikes in blood glucose.
 - Leads to increased hunger and overeating.
-

6. Artificial Additives

- Emulsifiers and preservatives can disrupt gut health.
 - Some additives linked to inflammation and changes in microbiota.
-

7. Interference With Satiety Signals

- Engineered for “hyper-palatability” (sweet + salty + fatty).
 - Overrides normal hunger/fullness cues.
-

8. Low Fiber Intake

- Most UPFs remove natural fiber.
 - Contributes to constipation and poor glycemic control.
-

9. High Glycemic Load

- Sugars + refined starches together stress the body’s insulin system.
 - Raises long-term risk of diabetes and obesity.
-

10. Breakdown of the Natural Food Matrix

- Highly processed textures and structures increase calorie absorption.

- Reduces nutrient availability and increases metabolic stress.
-

11. Displacement of Healthy Foods

- Eating more UPFs means eating fewer fruits, vegetables, and whole foods.
 - Leads to multiple micronutrient deficiencies.
-

Tips to Reduce Ultra-Processed Food Intake

Choose More:

- ✓ Fresh fruits and vegetables
- ✓ Whole grains (oats, quinoa, brown rice)
- ✓ Lean proteins (eggs, poultry, fish, beans)
- ✓ Nuts, seeds, and legumes
- ✓ Water, unsweetened tea, or sparkling water

Choose Less:

- ✗ Sugary drinks
 - ✗ Packaged snacks and candies
 - ✗ Fast food and fried foods
 - ✗ Processed meats (sausages, hot dogs, deli meats)
 - ✗ Instant meals and flavored noodle dishes
-

Key Message

Ultra-processed foods are everywhere, inexpensive, and convenient—but they are a major driver of poor nutrition, obesity, and chronic disease. Replacing even **one or two processed meals per day** with whole foods can significantly improve health outcomes.