

Ultra-Processed Foods



Ultra-Processed Foods (UPF)

More than half the calories the average person in the UK eats come from ultra-processed foods.

For UK children aged between 2 and 5 years old, close to two thirds (61%) of their total mean energy intake comes from UPFs.

What is Ultra-Processed Food?

Ultra-processed foods are formulations of food substances with little if any whole food and which typically contain added flavours, colours, and other cosmetic additives. These products are designed to be extremely palatable and convenient, are often sold in large portion sizes, and are aggressively marketed.

The prevalence of obesity and other diet-related chronic non-communicable diseases (NCDs), such as type II diabetes, hypertension, and some common cancers, is increasing worldwide. At the same time, ultra-processed food production and consumption are steadily increasing in both high-income and lower-income countries. Ultra-processed foods undermine food systems and dietary patterns based on minimally processed foods and freshly prepared meals

A diet high in Ultra Processed Food can lead to:

1. Excess weight and obesity
2. Metabolic syndrome
3. Too much of the wrong nutrients
4. Increased risk of disease (cancers, cardiovascular & type 2 diabetes)
5. Increased risk of developing gastrointestinal disorders such as irritable bowel syndrome, constipation & diarrhoea
6. Asthma & wheezing

These diseases are more common in adulthood but the road to chronic disease starts early.

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This table categorises the foods we buy into 4 groups from unprocessed to Ultra Processed Foods

It can be tricky to identify which is which when you are shopping or in supermarkets.

Category	Description	Food types
Unprocessed & minimally processed	These make up approx. 30% of the calories eaten in a typical UK diet	Fruit, veg, nuts, seeds, grains, beans, pulses, natural animal products, e.g. eggs, fish, milk and unprocessed meat
Processed Culinary Ingredients	These make up 4% of the calories we eat in the UK	Fats, e.g. butter, oils, vinegar, sugar & salt
Processed	These make up approx. 9% of the calories we eat in the UK. The main purpose of the processing is to prolong the foods life or modify sensory qualities such as taste or form	Smoked/cured meats, cheeses, fresh bread, salted/sugared nuts, tinned fruit in syrup, beer/wine
Ultra-Processed Foods (UPF)	These make up over 56% of the calories we eat in the UK. UPF's have usually undergone manufacturing processed that change the structure of the ingredients. They usually contain ingredients that you wouldn't add when making homemade food. You may not even recognise the names of these ingredients as they may be chemicals, colourings, sweeteners or preservatives.	Bread, pre-packaged meals, breakfast cereals, sausages & other reconstituted meat, confectionary, biscuits, pasties/buns/cakes, chips, soft drinks/fruit juices, crisps, sauces/gravy, other – tinned soup, baked beans, and meat alternatives.

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The confusion around Ultra Processed Foods

- Bread made from wheat flour, water, salt & yeast is processed BUT add emulsifiers and colourings and it becomes ultra-processed.
- Plain oats, corn flakes and shredded wheat are minimally processed BUT add sweeteners, preservatives, stabilisers or colourings and it becomes ultra-processed.
- Plain yogurt is minimally processed BUT add sweeteners, preservatives or colourings and it becomes ultra-processed.
- Baby puffs state on the ingredients corn and cheese powder. These starch-based puffs are typically made using steam-based extrusion cooking, which involves high temperatures that can damage heat-sensitive macronutrients and micronutrients, rendering them unusable by the human body

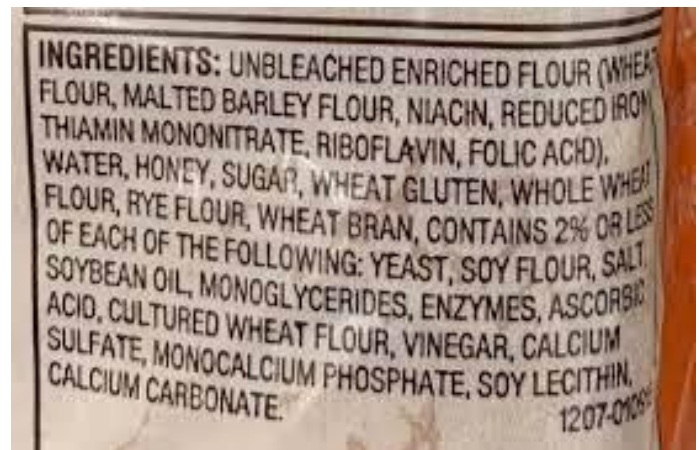
How do you recognise Ultra-Processed Foods?

1. A long list of ingredients
2. Unrecognisable ingredients
3. High sugar, fat & salt content is common in UPF. Check the labels!
4. Fresh Food with a long shelf life e.g., sausage rolls, pasties etc
5. Aggressive marketing and branding

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Examples of Ultra Processed Food labels



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How to support Early Years settings and Schools limit Ultra Processed Foods within their menus:

1. Enrol with Food for Life. Achieving the 75% freshly prepared criteria will support in the reduction of UPFs
2. Look carefully at breakfast & snack options being served as these often contain UPFs.
3. Provide plenty of ideas and examples of suitable recipes

Recipe Ideas for breakfast & snacks:

- 2 ingredient pancakes (egg & banana) topped with plain yogurt & fresh berries
- Shredded wheat (check the label as all brands are different), milk & chopped banana
- Plain porridge with oats & berries (avoid flavoured porridge as these often are Ultra Processed)
- Plain yogurt, mixed berries and granola (homemade)
- Breakfast frittatas (egg, tomatoes, mushroom)
- Wholemeal toast (check the label!) & scrambled egg
- Homemade blueberry muffin with sliced banana
- Homemade banana bread with fresh berries
- Rice cakes with peanut butter, houmous or cottage cheese
- Chopped fruit with nut butters (optional depending on policy)
- Boiled egg with asparagus dippers (seasonal) or whole meal toast soldiers
- Homemade granola bars

Top Tips to reduce Ultra Processed Foods

- Try varying ingredients in frittatas such as peppers, tomatoes, onions and courgettes
- Keep the options exciting and repeat the offering regularly so children's taste buds become used to new flavours and textures of whole foods

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- Choose wholegrains in their natural form, e.g. rice, pasta, noodles, rather than prepacked 'just add water' flavoured varieties such as pot noodles or rice pots
- Start experimenting with new ingredients, e.g. veggie chips using potato, carrot, or courgette baked in the oven with a drizzle of olive oil & herbs to flavour. This reduces the consumption of pre bought crisps
- Trade sugary, fizzy drinks for ice cold water infused with fresh citrus fruits (lemon, lime, oranges slices)
- Read labels and aim for foods with fewer ingredients – the less the better!
- Eat less but higher quality meat, e.g. chicken or pork rather than processed products such as sausages and burgers.

Things to watch out for:

- Packed Lunch items: Often ultra-processed and have a long shelf life
- Snack items: Often ultra-processed, packaged in wrappers and have a long shelf life (early years wafers, crisps, chicken raiders etc). These products are also hyperpalatable which encourages higher consumption.
- Vegetarian or vegan alternatives: We are advised to reduce the meat content in menus or opt for less but higher quality meat. Be careful not to substitute meat for vegetarian or vegan products that tend to be ultra-processed.
- Recent developments in the food industry have enabled new plant-based meats and dairy substitutes to be created. A number of these are classified as ultra-processed foods. Give examples such as vegan burgers, Quorn sausage rolls, or vegan ham. They are commonly marketed as healthy as they may fall under the vegan label.
- Breakfast cereals or bread are often ultra-processed. Choose natural products such as yogurt, fruit, nuts, eggs, homemade granola and fresh fruit.
- The constituents of ultra-processed foods include additives, dyes and emulsifiers.

Examples of meat swaps that are NOT ultra-processed:

- Tofu – the white curd made from soya beans
- Tempeh – made from whole soya beans

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- Banana Blossom – fleshy purple skinned flower, shaped like a teardrop. Inside the flower is the heart, which has the texture of tuna and absorbs flavours easily
- Jackfruit – largest edible fruit in the world! Great substitute to meat, with similar texture to pulled pork
- Plantain – Part of the banana family. Usually eaten cooked by boiling, baking, grilling, microwaving or frying. Ideal for casseroles and stews
- Beans, peas, lentils, pulses – great for casseroles, curries, stews, soups, sauces and salads!

Ultra-Processed Foods and the cost-of-living crisis

With the cost-of-living crisis worsening, having access to good food has never been more important. But it can feel tricky to talk about Ultra Processed Foods sensitively when costs are rising so dramatically, and people are finding it increasingly hard to make ends meet.

Here are some key points to consider when talking about ultra-processed foods during the cost-of-living crisis:

- Individual consumers or caterers are not to blame for their food choices. Food for Life believes that as the cost-of-living crisis continues, there needs to be swift action by government to support public health.
- Because the government currently isn't supporting people to eat well during the cost-of-living crisis, Food for Life is offering additional support, such as suggesting budget-friendly ways of swapping ultra-processed foods for healthy alternatives.

Meanwhile, we are continuing to campaign for the standards set out in the National Food Strategy to be adopted, calling on the government to make healthy eating easier.

- Expansion of free school meals. Every child should be provided with at least one healthy and sustainable meal each day, with schools and caterers empowered to deliver this, building on the example set by Food for Life.
- Introduction of a percentage reduction target for ultra-processed foods.
- A salt and sugar levy, using the proceeds to make fresh fruit and vegetables available to more people.
- An overhaul of public procurement with:

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- buying standards to be updated and mandated across the public sector, with monitoring and verification of compliance
 - schools and hospitals enabled to purchase more ingredients from sustainable and local British farmers
 - the 'loophole' which allows caterers to purchase low welfare meat from abroad closed
 - schools and hospitals incentivised to adopt a 'whole setting approach' to good food.
- Stronger government leadership to overhaul our food system with nature-friendly farming, supporting healthy and sustainable diets.
 - More action to spark a change in diet, with a rapid move away from intensively produced grain-fed meat, especially poultry. We support a "less but better" approach to meat consumption. As recommended in the National Food Strategy, retailers should be required by law to report on meat/dairy/plant protein sales, including method of production.

Food for Life Served Here helps to limit consumption of ultra-processed foods through the following standards:

- Standard 1.1 – Freshly Prepared. Ultra-processed foods can often be high in fat, salt, and sugar. This standard ensures that at least 75% of dishes on FFLSH menus are freshly prepared (on site or at local hub kitchen) from unprocessed ingredients, helping to limit consumption of ultra-processed foods.
- Standard 1.2 – Higher Welfare Meat. Ultra-processed foods can often contain low quality and/or reconstituted meat. This standard ensures all meat on FFLSH menus is farm assured, meaning that UK minimum standards on animal welfare are being met and meat is traceable back to the farm. This builds on the freshly prepared requirement for all meat products to have a minimum meat content of 62%.
- Standard 1.5 – No Unwanted Additives. Ultra-processed foods often contain added flavourings/enhancers, colourings, sweeteners, or preservatives to make them highly palatable. This standard ensures no ingredients or products containing the 19 prohibited additives are used in any FFLSH menus.

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- Standard 1.6 – No GM Ingredients. Ultra-processed foods can contain genetically modified (GM) ingredients and will be stated on the label if included. These are ingredients which have been modified by changing the genes of the crops and can be harmful to human health and the environment. This standard ensures no GM ingredients are used anywhere within FFLSH menus.
- Standard 1.7 – Free Drinking Water. Ultra-processed drinks, such as soft drinks, squashes, sports, and energy drinks can contain high amounts of sugar that can damage teeth and add extra calories to our diet. This standard ensures that drinking water is freely available and promoted as a more healthful alternative.

Useful external links

What Are We Feeding Our Kids? - BBC News:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aJ_D5YMNeDg