

Highly processed foods are usually bad for your health, so you should try to avoid them as much as possible. The difference between “real” and “ultra-processed” foods is explored below, to help you make informed choices about what to include as part of your diet.

## Real foods:

- Have undergone little or no processing. They are close to their natural state, and have had little added or removed.
- Contain lots of nutrients.
- Often contain healthy fats, good quality proteins, and/or fibre.
- Have few items on their ingredients list; or don't have an ingredients list at all, because they **are** an ingredient!
- Are usually in minimal packaging (or no packaging at all).
- Help to make you feel full for a long time.
- Are difficult to overeat, and don't usually cause cravings for more food.



## Ultra-processed foods:

- Have been altered from their natural state, and have often had something added or removed.
- Do not provide many nutrients.
- Often contain processed fats, refined carbohydrates and/or sugar.
- Have long ingredients lists, often including artificial ingredients that you don't recognise as being foods.
- Often have lots of packaging, e.g., are canned, boxed or come in plastic.
- Don't keep you feeling full for very long.
- Are easy to overeat, and often cause cravings for more.



In an important study, people were given ultra-processed food for two weeks, and then real (unprocessed) food for two weeks. They were allowed to eat as much as they wanted. When having the ultra-processed diet, they ate an extra 500 calories per day! They also gained 1kg (2.2lbs) in just two weeks, whilst on the real food diet they lost almost 1kg.

Other research into the effects of ultra-processed foods has found an increased risk of negative health outcomes in people who eat more of them. This includes an increased risk of heart attacks and strokes, worse mental health, and a reduced life expectancy. This emphasises the importance of trying to minimise your intake of ultra-processed foods.

It is not always easy to tell ultra-processed foods from real foods. This is in part down to how they are marketed, as well as traditional beliefs about what is and isn't healthy.

For example, many breakfast cereals are ultra-processed, even though they are often considered to be healthy and are promoted as being good for us. During their processing wholegrains are broken down, removing fibre and key nutrients. Other ingredients, such as sugar and preservatives, are often added too. These steps can result in an unnatural product that increases the risk of health problems.

Basing your dietary approach on foods which would be classed as “real” foods can go a long way towards helping you achieve your health goals.