

Real versus Processed Food - What I Need to Know

You should try to avoid highly processed foods where possible. Most foods have been processed to a certain extent, although some are clearly more artificially made than others. The content below explores the difference between “real” and “ultra-processed” foods, to help you make informed choices about what to include as part of your new way of eating.

Real foods:

- Have undergone little or no processing. They are close to their natural state, and have had little added or removed.
- Often contain lots of nutrients.
- Often contain healthy fats, good quality proteins, and/or fibre.
- Have few items on their ingredients list, and are made of ingredients you recognise as being natural.
- Are usually in minimal packaging (or no packaging at all).
- Help 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.
- Often 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., they 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, 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 has found an increased risk of negative health outcomes in people who eat more ultra-processed foods. This includes an increased risk of heart attacks and strokes, worse mental health, and a reduced life expectancy.

It is not always easy to tell ultra-processed foods from real ones though. This is partly because of how some products are marketed, as well as traditional beliefs about what is healthy. Examples of products often considered natural which are actually highly processed include vegetable oils (which are made from seeds) and breakfast cereals (which are made from grains, and often have sugar added).

Although it isn't always black and white whether a food should be considered to be “processed” or not, basing your new dietary approach on foods which would clearly be classed as “real” can go a long way towards helping you achieve your health goals. **As a general rule of thumb, try to choose foods with five ingredients or fewer as much as possible.**