

Eating Minimally Processed Foods Helps You Shed Pounds Twice as Fast as Ultraprocessed Options

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Eating minimally processed foods helped participants lose pounds at nearly double the rate of ultraprocessed diets, even when calories, fat, sugar, and protein were carefully matched
- › Researchers found that people on minimally processed diets improved craving control twofold overall, with a fourfold improvement in resisting savory cravings, making long-term weight management far easier
- › Ultraprocessed foods now make up more than 70% of the U.S. food supply, flooding daily diets with additives, seed oils, and engineered products that undermine health and longevity
- › Large reviews link ultraprocessed foods to a 50% higher risk of heart disease and 32 additional health problems, including sleep issues, anxiety, depression, and digestive disorders
- › Food companies engineer textures, flavors, and even sounds to bypass satiety signals and hook your brain's dopamine response, making ultraprocessed foods as addictive as alcohol or cigarettes

When it comes to losing weight, what you eat matters just as much as how much you eat. While you might think it's only about calories, protein, carbs, and fat, research points to another powerful factor at play — how processed your food is.

A recent study found that eating minimally processed meals leads to more effective weight loss compared to ultraprocessed foods. It highlights how food quality – not just food quantity – shapes your weight management results.

If you're tired of feeling stuck or watching your progress stall, looking at the amount of processed foods you have in your diet might be the missing piece. Once you have a better understanding of why this happens, it will open up an entirely new way to approach your weight goals.

Food Processing Shapes Your Cravings and Weight Loss Results, Study Finds

A paper recently published in the journal *Nature Medicine* investigated how the level of food processing influences outcomes like weight control and food cravings. The study, conducted by researchers from University College London (UCL) and University College London Hospitals (UCLH), is "the first interventional study comparing ultraprocessed food (UPF) and minimally processed food (MPF) diets in 'real world' conditions." It's also the longest experimental study of a UPF diet today.¹

"Previous research has linked ultra-processed foods with poor health outcomes. But not all ultra-processed foods are inherently unhealthy based on their nutritional profile," Dr. Samuel Dicken, first author of the study, said.

"The main aim of this trial was to fill crucial gaps in our knowledge about the role of food processing in the context of existing dietary guidance, and how it affects health outcomes such as weight, blood pressure and body composition, as well as experiential factors like food cravings."²

- **The participants included 55 adults** – Most of them were women in their 20s and up to their mid-60s who were eating outside of the official dietary guidelines before enrolling in the trial – meaning their body mass indexes (BMIs) were in the

overweight or obesity ranges. Their normal diets before the trial also contained an above-average proportion of packaged and ultraprocessed foods, making up as much as two-thirds of their calories.

- **The researchers established two distinct diets for this study** – One diet consisted of MPFs such as homemade spaghetti Bolognese, plain yogurt, and overnight oats, while the other was composed of UPFs that were classified as "healthy" – frozen lasagna, flavored yogurt, plant-based milk, and breakfast bars.³
- **Both diets were carefully balanced for nutrients** – This eliminates the possibility that differences in fat, sugar, or salt will affect the results. The diets were nutritionally matched based on the Eatwell Guide, which outlines the U.K.'s official government guidelines on how to eat a healthy, well-balanced diet.
- **During the trial, participants were provided with generous amounts of food** – The participants were divided into two groups. One group was initially given MPFs for eight weeks while the other group was fed with UPFs. They were told to eat freely without any restriction. After a four-week "washout period," the diets were switched. Overall, 50 participants completed at least one of the diets.⁴
- **Both groups lost weight, but with varying results** – The researchers noted that the weight loss was likely because of the switch to a healthier diet, compared to their typical unhealthy processed diet before the trial period. However, there was a noticeable difference in their weight reduction – those who consumed the MPF diet had a 2.06% reduction in their weight, while the UPF diet only led to a 1.05% reduction.

"These changes corresponded to an estimated calorie deficit of 290 kilocalories (kcal) per day on the MPF diet, compared to 120 kcal per day on the UPF diet. To put this in context, the Eatwell Guide recommends a daily energy intake of 2,000 kcal for women and 2,500 kcal for men," Science Daily reports.⁵

- **Those following the MPF diet also gained far better control over their food cravings** – Participants were asked to complete questionnaires before and throughout the trial to assess their food cravings. The researchers noted that people on the minimally processed diet experienced a twofold greater improvement in their ability to resist cravings overall.

This included "a four-fold greater improvement in craving control for savoury food, and an almost two-fold greater improvement in resisting whichever food they most craved."⁶

- **What's more, the composition of the weight lost was also different** – On the MPF diet, the weight reductions came from fat mass and excess body water; there were no changes in muscle or fat-free mass at all. This distinction matters because losing muscle slows metabolism and makes it harder to sustain weight loss.

By sparing muscle, the minimally processed diet supports healthier, longer-lasting results. In contrast, the ultraprocessed plan produced less fat loss and smaller overall improvements in body composition.

Overall, these findings point to a simple but powerful takeaway – If you want your weight loss efforts to work more effectively and minimize cravings, it's essential that you significantly cut back on your intake of ultraprocessed foods – the root of most chronic diseases today.

Ultraprocessed Foods Make Up More Than 70% of the US Food Supply

When you go to the grocery store today, chances are you won't see shelves upon shelves lined with fresh fruits and vegetables; most of the time, you'll see endless rows of ultraprocessed products. They're cheap, convenient, and because they're often heavily marketed as healthy, most of the time they end up on your dinner plate.

- **At least two-thirds of your diet is now made up of ultraprocessed junk foods** – A study published in Nature Communications notes that more than 73% of the American food supply is ultraprocessed – and that it's leading to adverse health effects.⁷

"We show that the increased reliance of an individual's diet on ultra-processed food correlates with higher risk of metabolic syndrome, diabetes, angina, elevated blood pressure and biological age, and reduces the bio-availability of vitamins," the researchers note.

- **Which foods are the worst offenders?** A separate study published in Public Health Nutrition noted that sodas topped the ultraprocessed list (90%), followed by mixed dishes and soups (81%), and sweets and snacks (71%). Meanwhile, minimally processed foods like fruits and vegetables are far down the list – making up about 12% of all purchases.⁸
- **Federal officials are now turning their attention to ultraprocessed foods (and their adverse effects)** – According to Robert F. Kennedy Jr., the newly appointed secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services "We are poisoning ourselves, and it's coming from principally these ultraprocessed foods."⁹

Eliminate these unhealthy foods is one of his agenda, and his movement, "Make America Healthy Again," highlights it as a key strategy to lower the rates of chronic diseases like **diabetes** and obesity.

Ultraprocessed Foods Put You at Risk of Dozens of Different Health Conditions

Ultraprocessed foods hide behind irresistible flavors, mouthwatering aromas, and interesting textures – but the fact is that they're inherently destructive because of their composition, which is something humans are not naturally designed to eat. These foods

are loaded with industrial additives, fake flavorings, and oxidized vegetable oils that hijack your hunger cues and flood your system with compounds your body doesn't recognize.

- **Consuming ultraprocessed foods is strongly associated with a higher risk of chronic illnesses and early mortality** – A study published in the BMJ reviewed 45 published meta-analyses involving 9,888,373 participants worldwide to determine the implications of these products for your health. In particular, they aimed to identify how strong the connection is between these foods and chronic illnesses, mental health problems, and dying earlier than expected.¹⁰
- **UPFs are linked to 50% higher risk of heart-related illnesses** – But that's just the tip of the iceberg; in fact, they found that ultraprocessed foods are associated with a whopping 32 conditions. These include sleep issues, anxiety, depression, gastrointestinal issues, and respiratory problems.
- **The more you eat these foods, the worse your health becomes** – The researchers noted that each time you increase your servings of ultraprocessed foods, your risk for developing chronic diseases increases.
- **So what makes ultraprocessed foods so dangerous?** The researchers say it's likely due to the synthetic nature of these foods. "Firstly, alterations in the food matrix during intensive processing, also known as dietary reconstitution, may affect digestion, nutrient absorption, and feelings of satiety.

Secondly, emerging evidence in humans shows links between exposure to additives, including non-sugar sweeteners, emulsifiers, colorants, and nitrates/nitrites, and detrimental health outcomes," the researchers said.¹¹

A separate review published in Clinical Nutrition found that the way some ultraprocessed foods are engineered – soft, low-fiber, and loaded with emulsifiers – makes them easier to chew and digest. However, this comes at a price. Faster digestion leads to faster glucose absorption, which forces your pancreas to pump out more insulin, increasing wear on your metabolic system over time.¹²

These Foods Are Also Designed To Be Addictive

I recently published an article featuring a [BBC documentary on ultraprocessed foods](#) and how they are strategically engineered to be addictive (The video above gives you a short teaser, but I recommend watching the full documentary on the BBC website¹³). They cleverly stimulate your senses and short-circuit your body's natural appetite controls. So if you've noticed how you can't stop eating a bag of chips, you're not at fault – it's simply how these foods are designed.¹⁴

- **Manufacturers play around with flavor, ingredients, and even textures** – For example, eating soft-textured snacks disrupts a key biological safeguard. These junk foods are designed to be crunchy on the outside, while the inside is soft enough to melt in your mouth.

This is intentional; since you're not chewing soft food as much, it short-circuits the normal satiety mechanisms you'll have if you were chewing food properly. Simply put, you're bypassing the mechanism that signals fullness, triggering your body to keep eating.

- **Even the sound food makes when you eat it is crucial** – Take for example when you open a can of soda – there are two noises, the click and the tear. There are sound engineers that work really hard to get these sounds just right; it's a concept called sonic branding. This is a marketing strategy where sound – jingles, chimes, or music – is used to build emotional connection and memory with consumers.
- **Ultraprocessed snacks compete for your "stomach share"** – In the documentary, Dr. Yanaina Chavez Ugalde from the University of Cambridge explains how ultraprocessed food companies have shifted their strategy from mealtime nutrition to all-day consumption. They don't just infiltrate your breakfast, lunch, or dinner, they aim to dominate your stomach share by encouraging all-day consumption through snacks.

- **Ultraprocessed foods are just as addictive as alcohol or cigarettes** – When you consume junk foods, your brain lights up with **dopamine**. This is a chemical that plays a central role in cravings. Traditionally, dopamine helps you feel satisfied during mealtimes. But with ultraprocessed foods, the hit is so intense and so immediate that it overrides normal controls. As a result, you keep eating even when you're full.

How to Break Free from Ultraprocessed Foods for Better Weight Management

If you're struggling with extra pounds and constant cravings, the real issue isn't just how much you're eating – it's also the quality of your food, particularly how processed your food is. Ultraprocessed products are designed to hijack your hunger signals, spike your blood sugar, and make it nearly impossible to stop at one bite.

In order to effectively trim down your waistline, you need to clean up your diet and replace these engineered foods with real, minimally processed options that support your body's natural balance. Here are some changes for you to make right now:

- 1. Replace ultraprocessed foods with real meals** – Instead of focusing on what you're cutting out, fill your plate with foods that leave less room for the junk. If you're used to eating breakfast bars or flavored yogurt, switch to whole fruits or plain yogurt. This not only reduces your intake of industrial additives, but also gives your body nutrients it will actually recognize and use.
- 2. Slowly retrain your cravings by swapping one meal at a time** – Cravings are the hardest part to fight, but research shows that minimally processed foods help restore your ability to resist urges. Take it step by step. If lunch is your most processed meal, focus there first. Trade in frozen lasagna or microwave meals for homemade spaghetti, a salad with protein, or even leftovers you cooked the night before. Within weeks, you'll notice cravings losing their grip.

- 3. Cut out seed oils from your diet** – Most ultraprocessed foods are loaded with oxidized vegetable oils that trigger inflammation and metabolic stress. These oils are loaded with **linoleic acid (LA)**, an omega-6 polyunsaturated fat (PUF) that causes metabolic damage and is what I believe to be the most damaging ingredient in today's modern diet. Choose cooking fats like grass fed butter, ghee, or tallow instead.
- 4. Protect your metabolism by eating food that forces you to slow down** – Soft, low-fiber, ready-to-eat foods are designed to be swallowed quickly. That tricks your body into overeating before fullness signals kick in. Choose foods with more texture – like apples instead of applesauce, roasted potatoes instead of fries, or whole cuts of meat instead of processed deli slices. Chewing more and eating slower allows your body to naturally regulate appetite.
- 5. Rebuild your daily routine around minimally processed meals** – If you're a busy parent, a shift worker, or someone who travels a lot, your challenge is convenience. The way forward is to build simple anchors into your day. For example, keep sparkling water in place of soda, carry fruit instead of packaged snacks, or prepare a big pot of soup to replace ready-made meals during the week.

These anchors create stability, making you less vulnerable to food companies' tricks and giving you full control over what goes into your body.

By addressing the true cause – the engineered nature of ultraprocessed foods – you're not just losing pounds. You're lowering your risk of dozens of chronic conditions, gaining control over cravings, and setting yourself up for lasting health.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) About Minimally Processed vs. Ultraprocessed Foods

Q: What's the difference between minimally processed and ultraprocessed foods?

A: Minimally processed foods are close to their natural state – like plain yogurt, fresh vegetables, or homemade pasta. Ultraprocessed foods are heavily altered, often containing additives, artificial flavors, seed oils, and preservatives, such as frozen lasagna, flavored yogurts, or packaged snacks.

Q: Do minimally processed foods really help you lose pounds faster?

A: Yes. A study published in Nature Medicine found people eating minimally processed meals lost pounds nearly twice as fast as those eating ultraprocessed diets, even when nutrients were identical.

Q: How do ultraprocessed foods affect cravings and hunger?

A: They're engineered to override your body's fullness signals. Minimally processed diets improved craving control twofold overall and fourfold for savory cravings, while ultraprocessed foods fueled stronger urges to keep eating.

Q: Are ultraprocessed foods linked to other health problems?

A: Absolutely. Research has linked them to a 50% higher risk of heart disease and 32 other conditions, including anxiety, sleep problems, digestive issues, and early mortality.

Q: What steps can I take to cut back on ultraprocessed foods?

A: Start with small swaps – like whole fruit instead of packaged bars, or roasted potatoes instead of fries. Use healthy fats like ghee or butter instead of seed oils, and prepare simple meals ahead to avoid relying on packaged convenience foods.

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