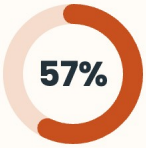
ULTRA-PROCESSED FOODS: WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

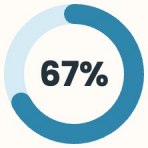
Ultra-processed foods are factory-made products built from ingredients you wouldn't find in a home kitchen, like corn syrup, hydrogenated oils, and artificial flavors. They're made to be cheap, quick, and very tasty, which also makes them easy to overeat. Here's what they do to your body and simple ways to eat fewer of them.



HOW COMMON ARE THEY?



of **adults'** daily calories



of **kids'** daily calories

More than half of what the average American eats is ultra-processed. For kids, it's **two out of every three bites.**

FROM WHOLE FOODS TO ULTRA-PROCESSED

1. Whole foods

Fruit, veggies, eggs, plain milk, beans, oats, fresh meat and fish, nuts

2. Cooking basics

Olive oil, butter, salt, sugar, honey, vinegar

3. Processed

Canned beans or veggies, cheese, fresh bakery bread, canned tuna

4. Ultra-processed

Soda, chips, candy, sugary cereal, hot dogs, deli meat, nuggets, frozen pizza

Less processed — More processed

WHAT THEY DO IN YOUR BODY

You eat more without noticing

In one study, people ate about **500 more calories a day** on an ultra-processed diet. They ate faster and gained weight in just 2 weeks.

"Healthy" versions still count

Even when both diets met healthy-eating guidelines, people lost about **twice as much weight** eating minimally processed foods.

More inflammation

Heavy eaters of ultra-processed food tend to have higher CRP, a blood marker of inflammation. Some additives may also upset healthy gut bacteria.

HEALTH RISKS LINKED TO EATING MORE

Compared with people who eat the fewest ultra-processed foods:

50%
higher risk of heart-related deaths

55%
higher odds of obesity

48%
higher odds of anxiety

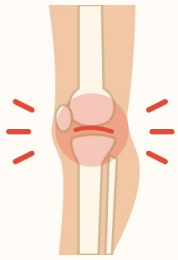
+12%
type 2 diabetes risk for every 10% more*

+12%
overall cancer risk for every 10% more*

+25%
dementia risk for every 10% more*

*For every extra 10% of your diet that comes from ultra-processed foods.

YOUR JOINTS NOTICE TOO



Knee arthritis
The heaviest eaters had a 10% higher risk of developing knee arthritis.

More knee pain
Linked to worse knee pain and thinner knee cartilage on MRI.

Weaker support
More fat inside the thigh muscles that help support your knees.

SWAP, DON'T STOP

Soda and energy drinks	Water, sparkling water with fruit, unsweetened tea	**Hot dogs, bacon, deli meat**	Home-cooked chicken, fish, eggs, beans
Sugary cereal or cereal bars	Plain oatmeal with fruit and nuts, or eggs	**Chips, crackers, cheese puffs**	Nuts, home-popped popcorn, veggies and hummus
Cookies, cakes, candy	Fresh or frozen fruit, a square of dark chocolate	**Frozen pizza, boxed meals**	Sheet-pan chicken and veggies, bean chili

START THIS WEEK

Trade **one packaged food a day** for a real one. Swapping just 10% of ultra-processed foods for whole foods is linked to a 19% lower risk of dementia.

Scan for references