

Understanding Processed Food: Impact on Health



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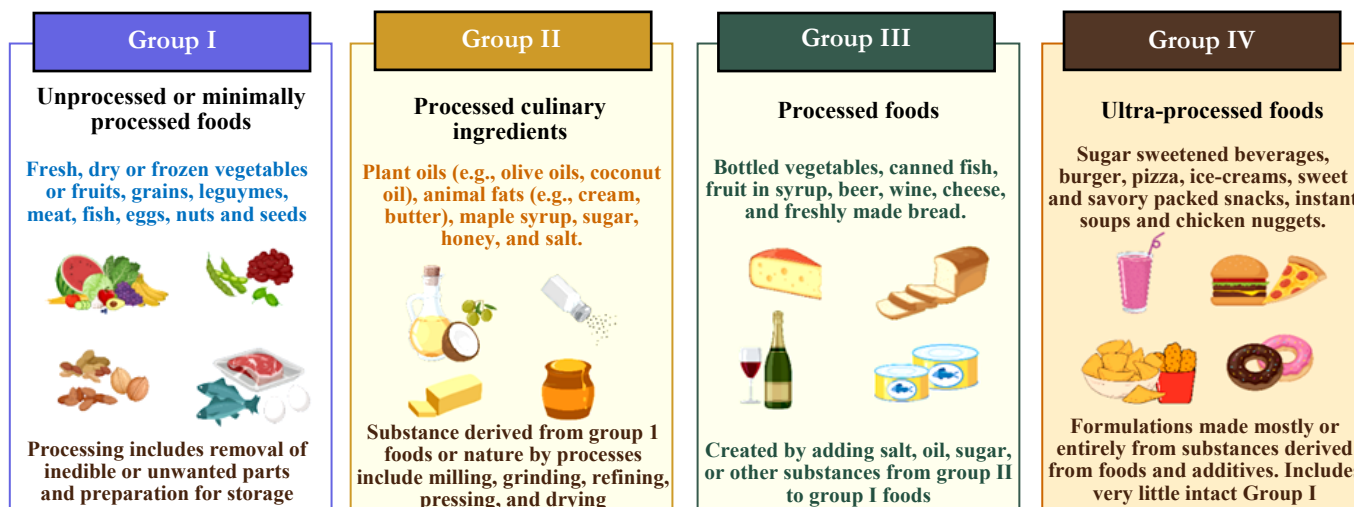
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In the modern diet, processed foods have become a staple due to their convenience, affordability, and extended shelf life. Food processing involves the activities used to transform raw materials into products suitable for human consumption. Traditionally, food processing includes drying, canning, fermentation, freezing, and smoking. Today, the global food system uses advanced new technology for food processing, leading to an increased reliance on industrially processed foods. Almost all foods consumed in modern societies can be considered “processed foods.”

Some processed foods provide nutritional benefits, while others are linked to significant health concerns. Therefore, to make informed dietary choices, it is crucial to understand the level of food processing and how to differentiate it. Hence, different classification systems have been developed to assess diet quality and health effects based on the degree of processing. NOVA is a widely used classification system developed to categorize food processing levels. It classifies all foods and food products into four groups according to the extent and purpose of the industrial processing they undergo. It considers all physical, biological, and chemical methods used during the food manufacturing process, including the use of additives. The four classified groups are Unprocessed/Minimally Processed Foods, Processed Culinary Ingredients, Processed Foods and Ultra-Processed Food (UPFs) (Sadler, Grassby, Hart, Raats, Sokolović, & Timotijevic, 2021).

NOVA Food Classification System



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Looking into the harmful effects of processed foods, the most significant health risks are associated with ultra-processed foods compared to minimally and moderately processed foods due to their poor nutritional profile and high content of harmful additives. Analyses of global food sales data and consumption patterns of processed food indicate a growing shift towards ultra-processed foods (Lane et al., 2024), though significant variation exists within and between countries and regions. Notably, over the past few decades, the availability and variety of ultra-processed products sold have surged rapidly in countries across diverse economic development levels, particularly in many densely populated low and middle-income nations (Baker et al., 2020). Hence, health risks related to ultra-processed food are increasing. A systematic review indicated a positive association between UPFs consumption and the risk of several health outcomes. Such as overweight and obesity, cardiovascular disease, cerebrovascular diseases, coronary heart diseases, hypertension, metabolic syndrome, depression, overall cancer, irritable bowel syndrome, postmenopausal breast cancer, gestational obesity, adolescent asthma and wheezing, and frailty (Chen, et al. 2020).

Therefore, to transition to healthier choices, a conscious effort is required to reduce the intake of ultra-process food. In order to determine ultra-processed food, check the

ingredient list for any ingredient from the ultra-processed category, such as food additives used to enhance the taste, texture, or appearance of the final product or food substances that are rarely or never used in the kitchen (Monteiro, 2019).

Thus, to reduce health risks associated with ultra-processed food and to promote overall well-being, choose a well-balanced diet consisting of whole, natural foods, and minimally processed foods.

Make informed choices, and take ownership of individual health to promote a better quality of life.



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