



Some "processed foods" especially 'ultra-processed foods' are known to be very bad for our health overall. They are now thought to be the main reason that so many people now struggle with their weight, causing problems like obesity, diabetes, and mental health problems.

What is going on?

All food starts out with as a living thing; a plant, animal. Most fruits and many vegetables can be picked and eaten. But most of the time, we do something with our food **before** we can put it into our mouths. People have always done this, using simple tools and fire for at least half a million years. In the modern world many foods go through lots of complicated processes before we eat them. Some of the processes are good news, but most can cause real problems.



Here are **three questions** you can ask yourself to check for 'problem processing' ...

1) "Can I see that the food was once part of a plant or animal?"

Can you see it is (or was) a leaf, stem, grain, fruit, seed, root, muscle, or organ etc? The harder it is to see what the living plant or animal was, the more likely it is that the processing is going to be harmful. It might be fine, but it might be good to check the ingredients, and the answers to the next two questions.

2) "Do I lose control, or have to work hard to control how much I eat of the food?"

3) "Do I usually end up feeling bad after eating this food?"

This can include feeling physically bad in the hours following eating, or feeling bad about yourself. (Less often we may feel worse for eating a food because an intolerance to things in foods like gluten, cow's milk protein, or lactose. It will be easier to tell if the food is less processed.)



Good foods give us the answers 1) yes, 2) no, 3) no: you can see what it was when it was growing, you can eat it without control issues, and feel good in the hours after eating

These questions help us notice the main kind of processing that damages our mental and physical health:

too much REFINING,

along with food engineering and flavouring, so it to looks, smells and tastes better, or like something else

the last kind of problem is with processing that causes **harmful CHEMICAL CHANGES**

REFINING means stripping away some parts of the original food to leave just one part, for example turning sugar cane into white sugar, and whole wheat grains into white flour. In the process they lose flavour, vitamins, minerals, fibre, healthy oils, and protein.

Read on for more **detail** about all of this, including why processed food can be addictive, 'good' processing, and the processes we do at home

Convenient doesn't always mean unhealthy!

We are all very grateful to have foods that have been prepared by someone else. Some factory-made foods are good for our health like dried or tinned beans, and chopped tomatoes. These foods make eating well more convenient, either by allowing the food to be stored between harvest and eating, or by doing some of the steps we'd have to do at home. We can see this applies to other helpful healthy convenience foods like frozen whole veg and peas, frozen whole fruit chunks and berries, and passata. Foods like cheese, tofu, tempeh, sauerkrauts, yoghurts and kefir can be made at home, it's just most of us don't have the time!



There are also many companies creating ready foods and meals from simple fresh ingredients.

Factory Foods - some Facts.

Most manufacturers want to make their products as cheaply as possible, and then selling as much as possible for the highest possible price. With food, a sure-fire way to do this is to make products from highly refined ingredients, and then take advantage of our natural instincts (which were built to find food in the wilderness) to choose our food by looking, smelling and tasting. This means the mixture of refined ingredients needs to be chemically engineered to feel, smell and taste like real food. Another way to take advantage of our instincts is to include lots of **fat, sugar and salt**, or at least 2 of those three.

most humans have difficulty resisting the combination of salt, sugar, fat and added flavourings

Think of sweet salty biscuits, most cakes, chocolates, snack bars, crisps, savory snacks, ice cream, doughnuts. These foods are effectively addictive, which is an excellent situation for the food companies who can continue to sell products based on really cheap ingredients.



Packaging, like processing isn't necessarily a bad thing, many foods need packaging to keep them clean and safe. However food packaging is also designed by extremely clever people to make us buy the food, and to make it look tastier, more fun, or healthier than it is, using colour, images and words. These include 'health halo' words like 'protein', 'vegan', 'natural' or 'home made'. **As a rule, the more the front of a packet is grabbing your attention, the closer you should look at the back to see what the food really is.**

Fat, sugar, salt, and flavourings combined with other highly refined ingredients also create a complete mismatch between what we see, feel, smell and taste, and what our guts detect in the food once we've swallowed it. This combination creates difficulty regulating our appetite, loss of control, an experience of addiction to some products, poorer mental and physical health.

If you find yourself in this situation, struggling with weight, mental or physical health issues on a diet high in processed foods, please remember

It is not your fault.

Countless millions have been spent to influence our decisions about what we eat.

'Advertising and marketing psychology' means **exploiting our natural instincts to make a profit.**

But you can take back control. The more you eat whole, unprocessed foods, the more you can get good feedback from your body and the easier it will be to avoid the harmful addictive foods.

PROCESSED FOODS and INGREDIENTS to look out for and avoid as much as possible:



Sugar (any colour!) including Fructose, Agave syrup

One the other hand ...

Fresh berries and fruits are healthy foods that naturally contain sugar.

There are two ways fruits get processed which can cause minor problems. The first is **drying** (eg raisins). Unless they are soaked it is very easy to over-eat **dried fruit**. The second is when they are turned into **juices and smoothies**. To avoid the sugar rush, drink them very slowly, or dilute!

White (wheat) flour

This is the main ingredient in baked goods - **pasta, breads, doughnuts, cakes, biscuits and pastries**. A lot of '**brown bread**' is made with white flour, plus some seeds, and some colouring, to give the impression it is better than it is. Even 'wholemeal' bread need only be 51% wholemeal. Look for 100% wholemeal.

White Rice. Plain starches (eg corn or potato starch)

Flavourings

The best way to get flavour in food is from good ingredients, herbs and spices (including pepper and chilli), and a little salt. Herbs and spices all have benefits.

On the other hand, other 'flavourings' - even the so-called 'natural' ones - are covering up for poor ingredients without adding nutrition, and it is best to cut right back on foods containing:

flavour, flavourings, artificial flavour/s, natural flavour/s or flavourings, monosodium glutamate/MSG, artificial sweeteners (saccharin, aspartame, acesulfame, sucralose) and hydrolysed protein.

Emulsifiers

It is early days with the research but it may well be that many artificial food emulsifiers such as **carboxymethyl cellulose, polysorbate 80** are harmful to the gut, leading to bowel inflammation, which could lead onto issues like allergies, auto-immune diseases and bowel disease.

Processed Meats (they help cause bowel cancer)

This includes **Bacon, Sausages, Salami, Pepperoni, Hot Dogs, Corned Beef, Ham etc.**

Vegetable Oils in processed foods, especially Coconut and Palm Oils.

Oils are refined, but the issue for many people is that oils are very rich in calories, and 'hidden' in processed or pre-fried food. Oils from tropical plants (coconut and palm for example) also have a less healthy profile than many other oils.

It is fine to use oils like **Extra virgin olive oil, and cold-pressed rape-seed (canola)** in dressings and cooking. Usually the original food (nuts, seeds, olives, etc) are better for your health than the oil extracted from them.

From Great to Not-so-good: what happens to grains

Healthiest grains are any **actual whole grains** like brown rice, millet, buckwheat, corn, oat groats.

Nearly as good are **part-processed grains** like bulgur wheat, oat-meal, porridge oats and polenta.

Not as good, but still better than white flour, are foods made with **whole-grain/whole-meal flours**

So, whole-meal pasta is better than normal white pasta. Pasta is best 'al-dente': a little chewy.

Stone-ground flours are better because the grains aren't smashed into such tiny bits as in standard flours, which as **very** easily digested, often releasing sugar into the blood stream too fast.

Processes we can do at home as well as factories

Frying and Charring

When foods are fried or deep fried a number of unpleasant chemicals are created which are very damaging to the body (they cause inflammation and promote cancer). The less of these we eat the better.

A lot of manufactured foods contain these harmful chemicals, and heat-damaged oils.

Many junk foods and take-aways are deep-fried.

Charring - any cooking process that makes the food blackened or really browned - also tends to form unpleasant and damaging chemical compounds. **Roasting** can combine the effects of frying and charring.

Obviously we can cope well with a certain amount of this particularly if we are eating plenty of fresh whole plant foods, but on the whole it is something to reduce.



Throwing out the best bits!

Do those potatoes really need peeling? Could those root veg just do with a wash and scrub instead? Why not just wash that apple instead of peeling it? Obviously not all peel and skin is edible, but a lot is.

A lot of the things that plants make to protect themselves from harm are the brightly coloured, strongly flavoured compounds that are very good for our health. And are often found mostly in the SKIN.

Smoothies and Juices

These release sugar into the blood stream very quickly because if we ate these fruit and veg whole it would take longer, and they wouldn't broken into such tiny bits before we swallowed them.

Cooking

Whilst many foods we often cook could be eaten raw, some foods just definitely need cooking. Fish, mushrooms and tomatoes are good examples. We've also seen that frying and charring can damage our food, and potentially cause us some problems. Steaming, light boiling, baking and stewing are all excellent ways of cooking food with minimum chemical damage.

Good Processes

Chopping, grating and slicing veg

Pro-biotics for free!

The healthy bugs that are used to make trendy things like sauerkraut and kimchi, and which help balance your microbiome (gut bugs), are found naturally on the surface of vegetables and fruits. They are killed by cooking. Before you cook something you can ask yourself if instead it could be chopped small, grated or finely sliced and eaten that way?

A word of caution though, this chopping, slicing and grating is better done at home rather than pre-chopped pre-prepared ... 'why' is a long story, and pre-chopped salad is better than no salad!

Fermentation

On the whole this makes foods more nutritious and easier to digest. Examples include yoghurt, kefir, sauerkraut, kimchi.

If you buy these fermented foods, (and this isn't something you HAVE to do at all) make sure that

- 1) They are 'live' and
- 2) They aren't full of added sugar

The books '[Wild Fermentation](#)' and '[Cultured Club](#)' show you how to do it for yourself, though it is worth knowing that most ferments become something like a pet - they do need regular attention and feeding!