

Consider using fewer highly processed foods

In recent years, we have increasingly relied on convenience foods for our everyday meals. I am interested in shifting back to more whole, natural foods, but would it really be worth the time and energy?

Processed foods aren't all bad. Sometimes they offer nutritional benefits: the phytonutrient lycopene, for example, is more bioavailable from canned tomatoes than fresh. Nutrition information on processed food labels can also be very helpful.

Still, there is growing evidence that trimming back on foods that have been highly processed, at least, could be a very healthful move.

A 2015 study in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* analyzed consumer food purchases from 2000-2012. More than 60 percent of calories came from highly processed foods and beverages. Plus, 60 percent of those highly processed foods were high in saturated fat, sugar and sodium, compared with just 5 percent of less-processed foods or foods that required cooking or preparation.

A more recent study, in the March 2016 issue of the journal *BMJ Open*, analyzed the added sugars in foods that more than 9,000 people reported eating in 2009-2010. They found that "ultra-processed" foods were responsible for 58 percent of the overall calories in the diet, and 90 percent of the calories from added sugars. The added sugar content in ultra-processed foods was five to eight times higher than in other foods.

You're probably asking right now — just what is a highly processed or ultra-processed food? The question is an important one, because some people hopping on the natural food bandwagon reject all processed foods, including pasteurized milk, canned or frozen vegetables — even "baby" carrots. Most nutrition authorities discourage that type of extreme behavior.

Although there's no hard and fast definition of highly or ultra-processed foods, the researchers in these two studies included foods that are highly modified and formulated far beyond the food item's original condition. They include foods such as refined breads, cookies and other commercially prepared baked goods, sugar-sweetened beverages, salty snacks, ready-to-eat or ready-to-heat foods, breakfast cereal, ice cream, salad dressing, pasta sauce and ketchup.

To reduce your intake of these types of foods, be mindful when you're at the grocery store. Instead of pasta sauce, get some low-sodium crushed or diced tomatoes and tomato sauce and add herbs and spices at home. Instead of frozen vegetable mixes with sauce, buy plain vegetables and stir-fry them with a bit of olive oil. Instead of frozen french fries or tater tots, buy real potatoes to dice up, sprinkle with garlic powder, and roast in a hot oven. Instead of seasoned rice or pasta mixes, choose plain brown rice or whole-grain pasta and spice it up at home. This way, you're more in control of the fat, sugar and salt in your food.

Few of us would find it practical to completely do away with processed — or even ultra-processed — foods. But cutting back in ways that make sense for you could provide a big boost to your diet.

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