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ULTRA PROCESSED FOODS

What are Ultra Processed Foods

Although the term '*Ultra Processed Foods*' is widely quoted as a negative in the media and by different consumer organisations, there is no clear definition of which foods fall into this category or whether they are necessarily any less healthy than foods made at home or in a restaurant.

The fact that foods, such as bread, are made in large scale bakeries does not mean they are '*Ultra Processed Foods*' nor that they are necessarily any less healthy than batched breads produced in a bakery where almost identical processes are used but on a smaller scale.

The size of the production facility does not make the foods bad.

The term '*Ultra Processed Foods*' appears to originate from the **NOVA food classification system** developed at the University of São Paulo, Brazil. This defined '*Ultra Processed Foods*' as typically having five or more ingredients including many additives and ingredients that are not typically used in home cooking, such as preservatives, emulsifiers, sweeteners, and artificial colours and flavours. These foods generally have a longer shelf life.

The focus of this definition is the recipe rather than the process of efficiently scaled production and, equally, the fact that a food falls into this category does not necessarily mean that it is detrimental to health.

Whether a particular food is safe for consumers to eat should not be defined by the manufacturing process but by the ingredients used which is the role of organisations such as the Food Standards Agency to determine.

On its website, the [British Heart Foundation](#) states that "more research is needed" to understand what elements of '*Ultra Processed Foods*' might be bad for us. They go on to say "Currently, it's also hard to know whether it is something within the foods that is the issue or whether eating a diet high in these foods suggests an overall lifestyle that is linked to poorer health."

The reality is that there are so many factors that can affect people's health that it is difficult to isolate one with any certainty.

Indeed, there are real dangers in applying generalisations, such as '*Ultra Processed Foods*', as by doing so we create unintended consequences in other areas.

What Makes '*Ultra Processed Foods*' So Bad?

There will always be a lobby that says traditional methods are better – that home cooked foods are tastier, healthier and generally good for us. But this is not necessarily so.

Many of our traditional foods use exactly the same recipe processes as those applied in large scale manufacturing.

On its website, the British Heart Foundation says in relation to '*Ultra Processed Foods*': "The actual processing of the food could also make a difference to how our bodies respond to it. Studies have shown, for example, that when foods such as nuts are eaten whole the body absorbs less of the fat than when the nut is ground down and the oils are released." Yet the grinding down of nuts to use in home recipes goes back in time.

In the world of pizzas, those produced en masse on a production line use exactly the same ingredients and processes as pizza produced in a takeaway or restaurant. The only difference is the scale of the operations.

Similarly, manufactured sandwiches use exactly the same ingredients as those made by sandwich bars and caterers – the bread is generally the same as are the ingredients. The fact that they are assembled on a production line, does not make them '*Ultra Processed Foods*' – yet they are often quoted as such.

Furthermore, most of the ingredients used to make a pizza, whether at home, in a factory or in a restaurant, are processed in the same form – from the flour, cheese and tomato sauce to the Pepperoni. And, exactly the same can be said of sandwiches and many other foods.

Again, it is not the process that is somehow at fault.

Why do we need to process foods?

In one form or another, foods have been processed throughout time. Wheat from the fields being ground to flour involves processing. The mixing of ingredients in a kitchen to make up a recipe involves processing.

Even the scale of production of products, such as bread, goes back in time. Traditionally, bakers have done this and have scaled up their production in line with growth in demand.

The scale of production of products like bread is not particularly new, although the scale has substantially increased as the population and demand has grown and technology has advanced.

Indeed, mass production has enabled us to continue feeding a growing population and better utilise our resources.

Furthermore, the introduction of preservatives into some recipes – with the approval of food authorities responsible for food safety – has enabled us to keep foods safe and fresh for long periods, reducing the risks of food poisoning and enabling us to feed the nation. Such processes have also substantially helped to reduce food wastage.

The UK also has very clear labelling regulations that require those packaging products to declare all the ingredients – so consumers have the information they need to make reasoned choices.

Again, there is no specific evidence that the additives used to extend shelf-life have any specific negative effects on health as they are already subjected to rigorous investigation before being approved for use.

Labelling and Consumer Confusion

The Institute of Grocery Distribution has looked closely at the term Ultra Processed Foods with consumer groups and found that there is a considerable amount of confusion over what this means.

They also concluded: “There is a risk that a label for ultra-processed foods could create greater confusion, particularly in the case of products which fall into the ultra-processed category but are also considered healthy using existing nutrition labelling.”

They also go on to say in their conclusions:

“The UPF concept challenges current official dietary guidance¹⁰, which means that some foods we consider to be healthy based on their nutrient profile would be classified as ultra-processed. Therefore, integrating the concept into dietary guidelines would require a significant change in nutrition advice.

“The government’s voluntary reduction and reformulation programmes actively encourage the food industry to reduce salt, sugar and calories

through product reformulation¹¹, which often means an increase in processing or addition of ingredients.

"The fortification of commonly consumed food products provides an effective mechanism to deliver key nutrients to at-risk groups. Changing dietary guidance to avoid UPFs risks undermining the potential gains that fortification can offer, as many fortified products are UPFs and fortification itself can contribute to the UPF classification of a product."

Conclusion

The demonisation of large scale food production is completely wrong as there is no evidence to suggest that the processes themselves are in any way damaging to the health of the nation. Indeed, without these facilities we would struggle to feed the UK's population; food prices would be significantly higher which would, in turn, directly affect the health of those less well off; food wastage would rise.

The term "*Ultra Processed Foods*" is misleading at best and is leading to a lot of wild and unsubstantiated claims being made that are damaging to our food industry and misleading consumers.

Note:

The British Sandwich & Food to Go Association, The Café Life Association and The Pizza Pasta & Italian Food Association together represent over 2000 food businesses across the UK, from major manufacturers and retailers, such as Greencore, Stateside Foods, Greggs, Subway and Samworths, to small independent sandwich bars and pizza delivery businesses.

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