

Understanding Ultra-Processed Foods

**A patient guide to identifying and
avoiding UPFs from the Marsden
Centre for Integrative Medicine**



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Marsden Centre For Excellence in Integrative Medicine

Why Ultra-Processed Foods Matter

Ultra-processed foods (UPFs) are industrially formulated products made mostly from substances extracted from foods (oils, fats, starches, sugars), chemically modified ingredients, preservatives, flavour enhancers, and additives you would not normally use in home cooking. While convenient and often inexpensive, research consistently shows that diets high in UPFs are associated with negative effects on health, including multiple metabolic and inflammatory pathways. This guide is designed to help you quickly recognize UPFs, understand how they affect your body, and replace them with simple, satisfying alternatives—without perfectionism. The Marsden Centre for Integrative Medicine created this patient guide to turn science into practical daily choices you can sustain.

How UPFs Can Impact Your Health

- **Weight gain & metabolic issues:** UPFs are often high in calories, added sugars, and unhealthy fats, contributing to insulin resistance, obesity, and increased risk of diabetes.
- **Chronic inflammation:** Additives, emulsifiers, and artificial sweeteners may disrupt the gut microbiome, leading to increased inflammation.
- **Increased cancer risk:** Large observational studies show that higher intake of UPFs is associated with increased risks of colorectal, breast, and other cancers.
- **Cardiovascular disease:** High sodium, refined fats, and chemical additives can contribute to hypertension, dyslipidemia, and arterial inflammation.
- **Gut-brain disruption:** UPFs may impair satiety signals, mood regulation, and gut barrier function.
- **Addictive eating patterns:** The combination of sugar, salt, fat, and flavours is engineered to stimulate cravings and reduce fullness signals.

The goal is not perfection—but awareness. Reducing UPFs, even gradually, can significantly improve metabolic, immune, and mental health. Consider starting with one meal or one product swap at a time; momentum builds quickly and benefits compound. Patients often report more stable energy, fewer cravings, better digestion, and clearer thinking within weeks of making small, consistent changes.



What Makes a Food “Ultra-Processed”?

UPFs typically include one or more hallmark features. When in doubt, flip the package and read the ingredients first. The NOVA classification system places UPFs in Group 4—formulations of industrial ingredients that go far beyond culinary processing. Below, we translate that science into practical signals you can spot in seconds.

1. Long, unfamiliar ingredient lists

Common red flags include chemical-sounding compounds, multiple sugars, and ingredients you would not stock in a home kitchen. Length alone isn't the only issue; the presence of cosmetic additives designed to alter taste, color, or texture is the giveaway.

- Artificial sweeteners (aspartame, sucralose)
- Flavour enhancers (MSG, disodium inosinate/guanylate)
- Emulsifiers (polysorbate 80, carboxymethylcellulose)
- Stabilizers/gums (xanthan gum, guar gum)
- Hydrogenated or interesterified oils
- Colorings and artificial flavours

2. Ready-to-eat, packaged, shelf-stable products

Especially products that combine refined starches, added fats, and sweeteners to create long shelf life and intense flavor. They're convenient, but that convenience often hides heavy processing and aggressive marketing.

- Packaged snacks
- Instant meals
- Sugary cereals
- Soft drinks
- Processed meats
- Commercial baked goods

3. Foods that taste "too good" and feel addictive

These products are engineered for "hyper-palatability"—a strong reward response that makes them hard to stop eating. If a food seems to vanish by the handful and you immediately want more, that's by design.

4. Highly altered formulas

If the product no longer resembles anything found in nature or requires industrial processing to exist, it is likely ultra-processed. Think of reconstituted meat shapes, whipped oil foams, or fiber added back after refinement. When the structure of whole food is stripped away, satiety and nutrient density usually drop.

Nutrition Facts

about 30 servings per container

Serving size 1/2 cup (40g) dry

Amount per serving

Calories

150

% Daily Value*

Total Fat 2.5g **3%**

Saturated Fat 0.5g **3%**

Trans Fat 0g

Polyunsaturated Fat 1g

Monounsaturated Fat 1g

Cholesterol 0mg **0%**

Sodium 0mg **0%**

Total Carbohydrate 27g **10%**

Dietary Fiber 4g **14%**

Soluble Fiber 1g

Insoluble Fiber 2g

Total Sugars 0g

Includes 0g Added Sugars **0%**

Protein 5g

Vitamin D 0mcg 0% • Calcium 0mg 0%

Iron 1.6mg 8% • Potassium 150mg 4%

*The % Daily Value (DV) tells you how much a nutrient in a serving of food contributes to a daily diet. 2,000 calories a day is used for general nutrition advice.

INGREDIENTS: WHOLE GRAIN ROLLED OATS.

Common Examples of Ultra-Processed Foods

Recognizing categories will help you scan a grocery aisle quickly. The examples below are widespread in modern diets and often marketed as convenient, fun, or even “healthy.” Keep in mind that occasional use is not a failure; the aim is to shift the overall pattern of your choices toward minimally processed foods.

- Soda, energy drinks, flavoured coffees
- Packaged cookies, cakes, pastries
- Instant noodles, ready-meals, microwavable dinners
- Chips, crackers, pretzels
- Sweetened yogurts and flavoured milk
- Chicken nuggets, frozen fish sticks, deli meats
- Flavoured cereals, cereal bars, and granola bars
- Meal replacement shakes with long ingredient lists

Why these are problematic: they typically bundle refined starches, added sugars, low-quality fats, and salt with cosmetic additives to create strong flavor and texture but minimal fiber or micronutrients. They digest rapidly, spike blood sugar, and destabilize appetite regulation, which can drive overeating later in the day. Over time, this pattern increases cardiometabolic risk and may also affect the gut–brain axis, mood, and sleep quality.





Healthier Alternatives

Simple swaps that preserve flavor and cut processing

Swap UPFs for minimally processed options whenever possible. These alternatives emphasize intact plants, quality proteins, and natural fats. They're built from short ingredient lists you can pronounce and usually prepare in minutes. Below are practical substitutions you can start today; personalize them to your culture, budget, and kitchen equipment.

Instead of: Sugary breakfast cereal | Try: Oatmeal with fruit and nuts. Oats provide beta-glucan fiber for cholesterol support and steady energy. Top with cinnamon and berries for sweetness without a sugar crash.

Instead of: Flavoured yogurt | Try: Plain Greek yogurt with honey or berries. You control the sweetness and gain extra protein for satiety. Add nuts or chia for healthy fats and texture.

Instead of: Chips and salty snacks | Try: Nuts, seeds, popcorn made at home. Roast nuts with smoked paprika and olive oil, or air-pop popcorn and finish with sea salt and nutritional yeast.

Instead of: Frozen breaded chicken | Try: Baked chicken breast with herbs. Coat with olive oil, garlic, rosemary, and lemon; bake once and use for salads or wraps all week.

Instead of: Sweetened drinks | Try: Water, herbal teas, sparkling water with lemon. Infuse with mint, cucumber, or ginger for flavor. Keep a reusable bottle nearby to make hydration effortless.

Instead of: Pre-made sauces | Try: Homemade tomato sauce, tahini, olive oil, herbs. Blend pantry staples in minutes and freeze small portions to avoid last-minute UPF purchases.



How to Identify UPFs When Shopping

A fast checklist for smarter carts

Use this simple checklist to evaluate packaged foods before they land in your basket. Start with ingredients, then consider packaging claims and marketing tactics. If several items below are true, treat the product as likely ultra-processed and look for a simpler alternative.

- 5 or more unfamiliar ingredients?
- Additives ending in -ate, -ide, -ose, or -ol?
- Words you wouldn't use in your own kitchen?
- Bright colours, cartoon labels, heavy marketing?
- Shelf-stable but looks like it should require refrigeration?
- Does it contain added flavours rather than real food ingredients?

If you answer yes to several, it's likely ultra-processed. One helpful habit is to compare two versions of the same product: choose the one with fewer ingredients and no artificial sweeteners, emulsifiers, or colorings. Another is to keep "default" whole-food options on hand—eggs, canned beans, frozen vegetables, and whole grains—so you can make a quick meal without resorting to UPFs.





How to Reduce Ultra-Processed Foods in Your Life

Small steps, big impact

Behavior change sticks when it's realistic and rewarding. Focus on what to add, not only what to avoid. Build meals from vegetables, fruits, legumes, nuts, eggs, whole grains, fish, poultry, and high-quality dairy. Plan simple, repeatable menus and batch-cook basics so weekday choices are easy. Keep snacks intentional rather than automatic—and read ingredients, not just the nutrition label.

- Cook more at home: Even simple meals reduce UPF exposure.
- Choose whole foods: Vegetables, fruits, legumes, nuts, eggs, whole grains, fish, poultry, and high-quality dairy.
- Plan simple meals: The fewer the ingredients, the better.
- Limit snacking: Snacks are one of the biggest sources of UPFs.
- Shop the perimeter of the grocery store where fresh foods reside.
- Read ingredients—not just the nutrition label.

Practical tactics: schedule one weekly cook-up to roast vegetables, cook a grain, and prepare a protein; assemble grab-and-go snack boxes with nuts and fruit; freeze portions of homemade sauces; and keep a written list of five fast meals you can make in under 15 minutes. Over time, your environment—not willpower—will drive most of your wins.



Key Takeaway

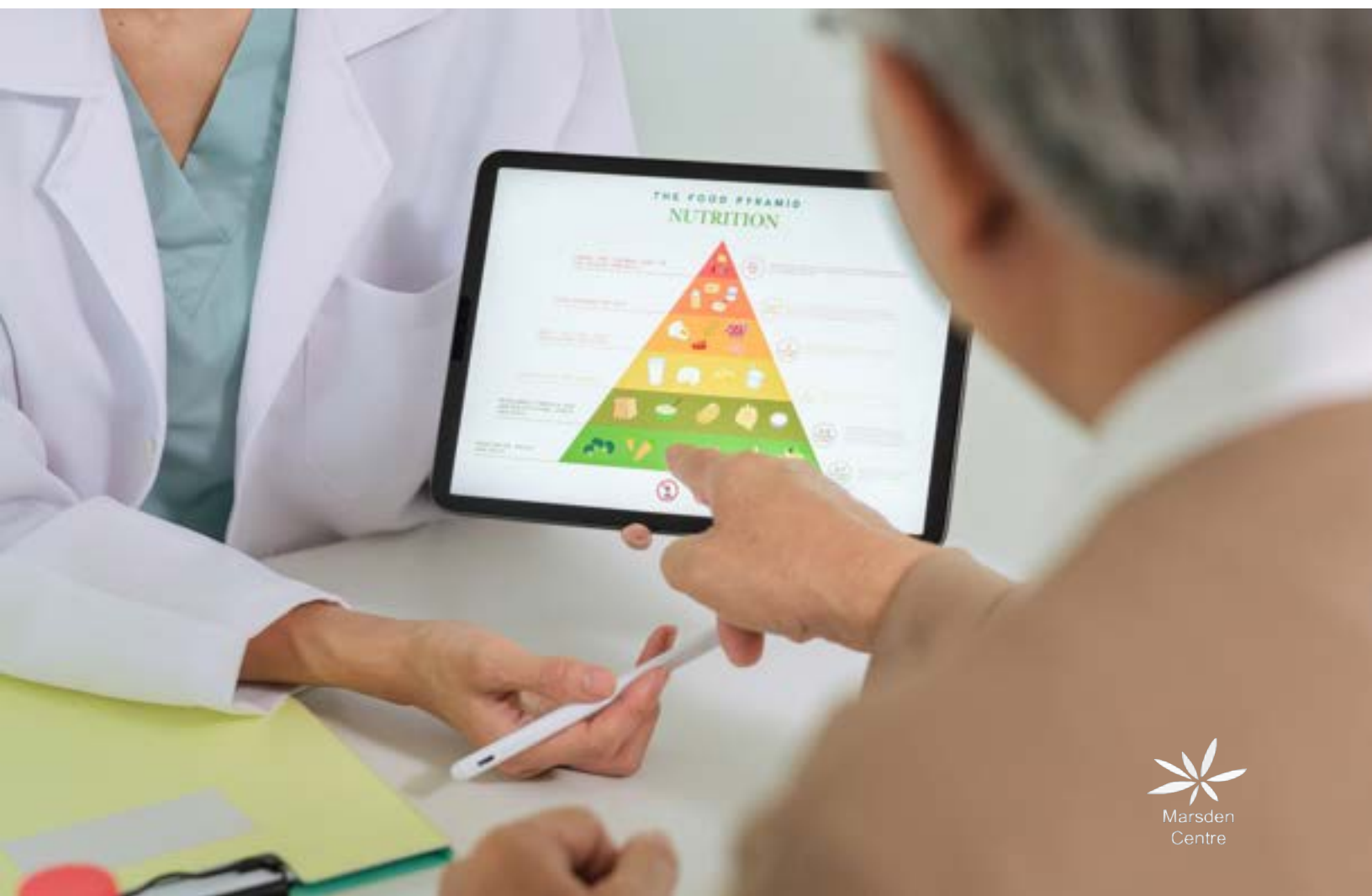
Ultra-processed foods are everywhere, but with awareness and practical strategies, you can reduce their impact on your metabolic, immune, and overall health. Small daily choices add up to major lifelong benefits. You don't need to be perfect to feel better—swap a few products, cook one extra meal at home, and notice how your energy, cravings, and mood respond. Share your wins with your care team to keep momentum strong.



Need Support Making Nutrition Changes?

At the Marsden Centre for Integrative Medicine, our team helps patients make sustainable, evidence-informed changes that support metabolic health, energy, immune function, weight management, and chronic disease prevention. We combine nutrition counseling with practical skills—label reading, meal planning, and grocery strategies—to help you build confidence and consistency. If you're navigating complex health concerns or just want accountability, we're here to help.

Contact us to book a nutrition or integrative health consultation. Evidence-informed care, advanced diagnostics, and a team dedicated to helping you thrive. Together, we can design a plan that respects your culture, preferences, and schedule while steadily reducing ultra-processed foods and increasing nutrient-dense, satisfying meals.



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