

GUT INSTINCT

PROCESSED VS ULTRA-PROCESSED FOODS AND YOUR GUT

Many of the foods we eat today look very different from how they started, but not all “processed” foods are bad. Understanding the difference means we can make informed decisions for our gut health.

What is the difference?

Processed foods are foods that have been altered from their natural state for safety, convenience, or shelf life. Many remain nutritious.

Examples include - Frozen vegetables, canned legumes, natural yoghurt, cheese, fresh bread

Ultra-processed foods (UPFs) are industrially manufactured products made largely from refined ingredients, additives, and little whole food.

Examples include - Soft drinks, packaged snacks, instant noodles, processed meats, fast food, ready meals

How do Ultra-processed foods affect your gut?

Your gut contains trillions of microorganisms (the gut microbiome) that play a critical role in digestion, immune function, and overall health. A diet high in ultra-processed foods can negatively impact this system in several ways:

Reduced microbial diversity

Ultra-processed foods are typically low in dietary fibre, which is essential for nourishing beneficial gut bacteria. Lower diversity in the microbiome is associated with poorer health outcomes.

Disruption of the gut lining

Certain food additives, including emulsifiers, have been shown to alter the gut barrier and may contribute to increased intestinal permeability and inflammation.

Increased inflammation

Diets high in refined sugars, unhealthy fats, and additives are associated with chronic low-grade inflammation, which can affect both gut and metabolic health.

Digestive Symptoms

Higher intake of ultra-processed foods has been linked with gastrointestinal symptoms such as bloating, altered bowel habits, and functional gut disorders.

Can you reverse the effects on your gut?

Thankfully, the gut microbiome is dynamic and responsive to dietary change. Even short-term dietary changes can significantly alter gut bacteria composition, highlighting the importance of consistent, long-term eating patterns.



Strategies to support your gut health

- **Increase intake of fibre-rich foods** - Vegetables, fruits, legumes, whole grains
- **Include fermented foods** - Yoghurt, kefir, kimchi, sauerkraut
- **Reduce ultra-processed foods** - Focus on gradual, sustainable changes
- **Eat a variety of whole foods** - Supports microbial diversity
- **Maintain hydration and physical activity** - Supports normal digestion and gut function

A Practical Guide

- Choose foods closer to their natural state
- Limit foods with long ingredient lists and additives
- Aim for balance, not perfection

Focus on adding more whole foods rather than removing everything at once. **Even a few simple swaps each day can support a healthier gut microbiome.**

Mayonnaise (store-bought, contains emulsifiers) → **Freshly made guacamole or mashed avocado**

Processed meats (sausages, deli meats) → **Freshly cooked chicken, turkey, or lean meats**

Breakfast cereals (highly refined, added sugars) → **Oats or muesli with fruit and yoghurt**

Flavoured yoghurt (high in added sugars & additives) → **Natural or Greek yoghurt with fresh fruit**

Salad dressings (store-bought with additives) → **Olive oil, lemon juice, and herbs**

Soft drinks / diet drinks → **Sparkling water with fresh lemon or fruit**

Packaged snack bars, muesli bars → **Nuts, seeds, or homemade oat-based snacks**

Processed meats are a known bowel cancer risk. Diets high in ultra-processed foods are also increasingly linked with bowel cancer risk in research studies, so aiming for mostly whole/minimally processed foods is a sensible gut-health choice.

RECIPE - CHOCOLATE TAHINI ENERGY BITES

These no-bake chocolate tahini bites are made with whole-food ingredients like oats, chia seeds and cacao. They're rich in fibre, healthy fats and antioxidants, making them a smarter alternative to ultra-processed snacks.

Ingredients (makes ~10-12 bites)

- 1 cup rolled oats
- ½ cup natural tahini (or peanut butter)
- ⅓ cup maple syrup or honey
- 2 tbsp cacao powder
- 2 tbsp chia seeds
- 1 tsp vanilla extract
- Pinch of sea salt
- Sesame seeds, nuts, coconut

Method

1. Add all ingredients to a bowl
2. Mix until fully combined (should be sticky)
3. Roll into small balls
4. Place in fridge for 20-30 minutes to firm up
5. Roll in toasted sesame seeds, nuts or coconut (optional)
6. Store in fridge and enjoy!

