

Ultra-processed foods

Balanced food and drink choices provide nutrients and energy for nourishing and powering our body through the day. Food and drink choices are influenced by many factors including accessibility, food security, culture - central to time spent with friends and family.

The **Australian Dietary Guidelines**ⁱ provide guidance on the amounts and types of nutritious foods needed every day for health and wellbeing. The guidelines advise limiting discretionary food choices which are high in saturated fats, added salt, sugar and alcohol, as these are associated with increased risk of obesity and chronic diseases.

However, 67% of Australian adults and 25% of children are overweight or obeseⁱⁱ, while food insecurity remains a major challenge for many people in our community. Other issues include climate change and biodiversity loss of plants and animals.

In the search for solutions, the use of 'food processing' and 'ultra-processed food (UPF)' terms, and associated classifications, are used in research to address public health and environmental outcomes.

This paper outlines the limitations of the 'ultra-processed food' term and provides an alternative perspective to address these issues.



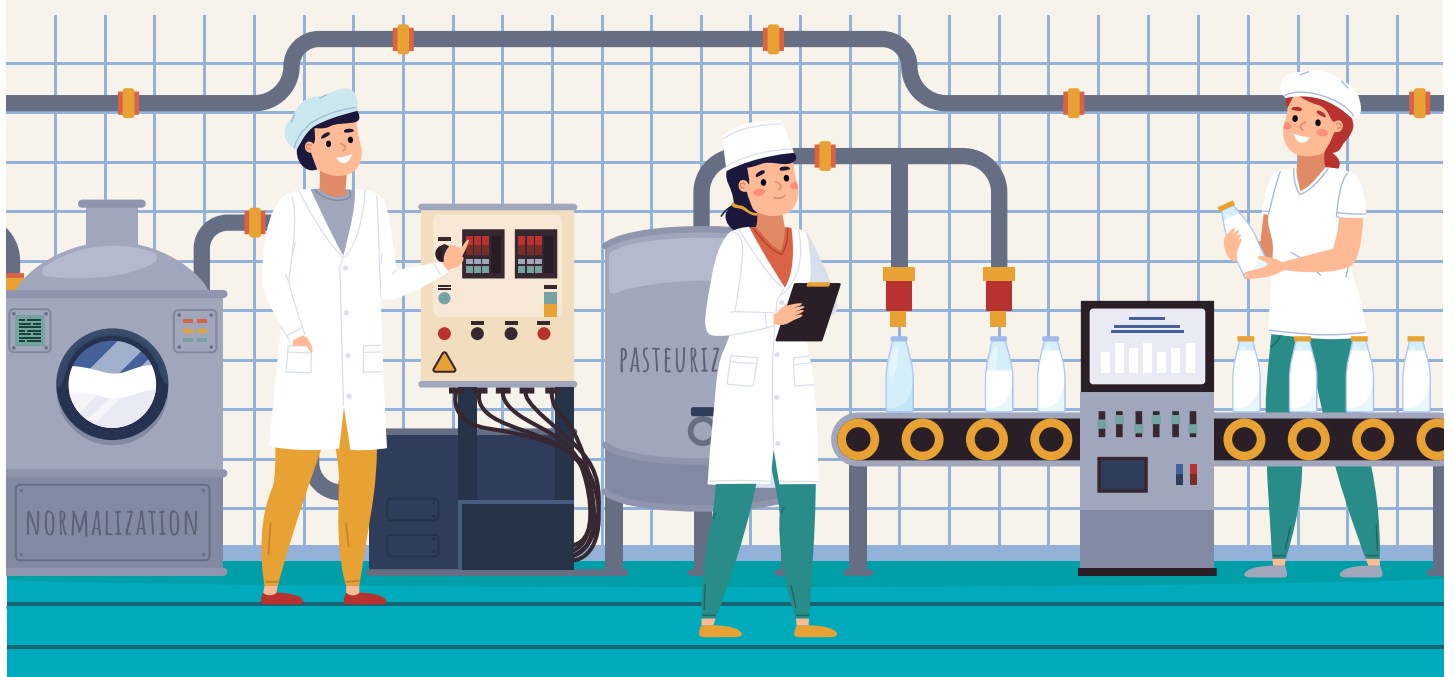
More 'processed' food does not mean 'less healthy'

Food processing is a term that is used to describe a variety of preparation and cooking techniques, including packaging and preservation, to convert food ingredients into safe, edible foods and drinks.

Food processing can improve the access, safety, choice, sustainability and nutrition of our food supply. For example, food fortification enhances the micronutrient content of a food (e.g. folic acid in bread). Food reformulation can increase fibre or reduce the saturated fat, added salt and sugar content of foods and drinks to produce healthier options, in line with Australian Dietary Guidelines objectives.

In some cases, food processing improves bioavailability of nutrients (e.g. lycopene in tomato).

Currently, there is no proven correlation with the nutritional compositional of food and the level or amount of food processing.



'Ultra-processed food' classifications can contradict the scientific evaluation of foods

NOVAⁱⁱⁱ is a widely referenced food classification system based on the level of processing which includes the term 'ultra-processed food' group. While there is no consensus on a legal definition of 'ultra-processed foods', it commonly encompasses a broad range of foods prepared with industrial processing techniques, including food additives and multiple ingredients. Food additives have undergone extensive toxicological assessments by FSANZ, EFSA and other entities worldwide, which ensures the safety and healthiness of these.

While some 'ultra-processed foods' can be discretionary foods that are high in saturated fat, salt and sugar, and which should be limited in our diet, others are core everyday foods which can be nutritious and convenient.

A critical review^{iv} of research on food processing classifications concluded that "most classification systems are not aligned with existing evidence on nutrition and food processing."

The NOVA system has been used in epidemiological studies to assess the relationship between consumption of UPF, obesity and other non-communicable diseases. Epidemiological studies are designed to observe what happens

in populations. They often have a high degree of uncontrolled confounding factors (i.e., levels of smoking, alcohol intake physical (in)activity and overall diet quality) and do not allow for any conclusion of causality (cause and effect). To reach such a conclusion, intervention studies would be needed. The existing epidemiological studies do not isolate the level of processing of a food. Importantly, the type of processing used to make a food does not determine or predict nutrient density or overall contribution to the diet. The role of any given food in a healthy diet is a function of its nutritional composition, the amount and frequency of its consumption, and an individual's overall eating habits. Therefore, the nutritional quality of a food should be the primary consideration, rather than its level of processing.



Food safety at the heart of public policy

The food and drink industry places consumer safety first. If food is not safe, it is not food.

A primary reason for food processing is to produce safe food. Food processing removes or destroys micro-organisms which can cause illness therefore making food safe and extending shelf-life.

The food and drink industry supports research into the relationship between food processing and potential impacts on our health, the environment and food safety.



'Ultra-processed food' terminology confuses health professionals and consumers

There is limited research to date of how consumers understand and apply NOVA and the term ultra-processed food in shopping and food choice purchases. Recent studies indicate mixed results with consumers showing confusion between the different NOVA groups^v. This is also demonstrated among professionals who disagree and have inconsistent identification of classifying foods as UPF^{vi, vii}.

NOVA classification suggests that food processing should be a central feature of food classification systems and a fundamental principle of dietary guidelines. However a number of studies comparing NOVA with other classification systems indicate that classifying foods based on processing does not indicate the nutritional value of the food and would provide confusing messages to consumers^{viii} and cause consumer rejection of vital food innovations and reformulations that contribute to a healthy food supply.

The NOVA classification creates consumer distrust of the food industry and food safety government agencies, which in turn impacts their food choices and food security.

Unintended consequences of avoiding all ‘ultra-processed foods’

A core nutrition principle is consumption of whole foods. However, many foods are processed as processing encompasses a wide range of activities. The food industry acknowledges that there are some processed foods which can be further improved nutritionally, and the food industry continues their efforts to improve them where possible. Foods produced by the industry facilitate everyday life and contribute to food safety, health and pleasure.

The key challenge is categorising foods to help consumers make healthy diet choices. Many nutritious packaged food products are considered UPF in the current NOVA classification including low-fat fruit yoghurt, plant based milks, and whole grain bread.

The avoidance of foods deemed as ‘ultra-processed’, even when they have a nutritious composition, could decrease intake of core foods and their nutrients e.g. wholegrain bread containing dietary fibre and micronutrients.

With the right proportions and ingredients you can prepare and cook healthy food at home, but it cannot be assumed that a homemade meal is healthier than purchased processed food.



Alternative solutions to improve health and the environment beyond processing

The food industry plays a major role in bringing food to market while considering the impact of foods and drink on consumers/people and the environment. There are numerous activities and initiatives in which the food industry can be involved and champion beyond the manufacture of food and drinks to improve people’s diets and the planet. Some are listed below:

- » **Promotion of a healthy diet:** Based on the Australian Dietary Guidelines, considering core food groups, and the nutritional composition of a product alongside frequency of consumption, portion size, and lifestyle.
- » **Innovation:** Support innovations, such as reformulation and fortification, to provide products such as low fat spreads, low sugar drinks or fortified cereals.
- » **Education:** Provide consumers with information to choose a healthy diet through education for all ages, labelling and awareness campaigns.
- » **Food environments:** Make it easier to choose healthy and sustainable diets. For example, making healthier food choices available in all supermarkets, schools and aged care facilities etc., as well as reducing our food waste.
- » **Marketing and advertising:** Ensure advertising and marketing is responsible and truthful.
- » **Lifestyle:** Promote a healthy lifestyle, including physical activity and sport, alongside appropriate serving sizes, mindful eating and a healthy and balanced diet.

ⁱ Eat For Health The guidelines [internet] [cited 2023 May 23]. Available from <https://www.eatforhealth.gov.au/guidelines>

ⁱⁱ Australian Bureau of Statistics. Overweight and obesity [Internet]. Canberra: ABS; 2017-18 [cited 2023 May 23]. Available from: <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/health-conditions-and-risks/overweight-and-obesity/latest-release>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Monteiro CA, Cannon G, Levy RB, Moubarac JC, Louzada ML, Rauber F, Khandpur N, Cediel G, Neri D, Martinez-Steele E, Baraldi LG, Jaime PC. Ultra-processed foods: what they are and how to identify them. *Public Health Nutr.* 2019 Apr;22(5):936-941.

^{iv} Sadler, C. R., Grassby, T., Hart, K., Raats, M., Sokolovi, M., & Timotijevic, L. (2021). Processed food classification: Conceptualisation and challenges. *Trends in Food Science & Technology*, 112, 149-162

^v Ares G., Vidal L., Allegue G., Giménez A., Bandeira E., Moratorio, X. et al. (2016). Consumers’ conceptualization of ultra-processed foods. *Appetite*, 105, 611-617.

^{vi} Sadler C.R., Grassby T., Hart K., Raats M.M., Sokolovi M., Timotijevic L. (2022). “Even We Are Confused”: A Thematic Analysis of Professionals’ Perceptions of Processed Foods and Challenges for Communication. *Frontiers in Nutrition*, 9.

^{vii} Braesco, V., Souchon, I., Sauvant, P. et al. Ultra-processed foods: how functional is the NOVA system?. *Eur J Clin Nutr* 76, 1245-1253 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41430-022-01099-1>

^{viii} Fitzgerald M. (2023) it is time to appreciate the value of processed foods. *Trends in food science and technology*. 134,222-229



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