

Ultra-Processed Foods: A Visual, Easy-to-Read Guide

What Are Ultra-Processed Foods (UPFs)?

UPFs are foods that have been heavily altered from their original form and often contain additives your body doesn't naturally recognise. They're engineered to hit the “*bliss point*” — making them taste irresistible and easy to overeat.

“Ultra-processed foods are usually ones with a long list of ingredients, many of them being ones you wouldn't recognise or have at home in your kitchen cupboards.”

Why Do We Eat So Many UPFs?

- Busy lifestyles
- Low cost and convenience
- Clever advertising
- Long shelf life
- Children quickly develop a preference for them



But research now links high UPF intake to:

- Poorer physical health
- Lower mood and mental wellbeing
- Gut health disruption
- Higher calorie intake with fewer nutrients

How UPFs Affect the Body

UPFs often contain:

- Emulsifiers
- Artificial colours and flavourings
- Sweeteners
- Preservatives



They are typically **high in fat, sugar and salt**, but **low in fibre, vitamins and minerals**.

Why Reducing UPFs Matters

Emerging evidence shows that diets high in UPFs may:

- Increase inflammation
- Disrupt gut bacteria
- Make weight management harder
- Reduce overall diet quality

The good news: **small, sustainable changes make a big difference.**

Simple Food Swaps

Below are everyday swaps that reduce UPFs without making life harder.

Drinks

- **Limit:** Sugary or artificially sweetened drinks, energy drinks, flavoured coffees
- **Swap for:** Water, tea/coffee, herbal tea, sparkling water, cocoa + milk

Breakfast

- **Limit:** Instant oats, sugary cereals, breakfast bars
- **Swap for:** Whole oats, low-sugar muesli, wholegrain cereals

Proteins

- **Limit:** Ham, salami, bacon, sausages, nuggets, vegan 'meats'
- **Swap for:** Fresh meats, tofu, Quorn, good-quality sausages/burgers

Quick Meals

- **Limit:** Cuppa soups, tinned soups, instant noodles, flavoured mash
- **Swap for:** Fresh soups, homemade wedges, ready-to-eat grains

Dairy & Snacks

- **Limit:** Cheese slices, cheese strings, flavoured popcorn, coated nuts
- **Swap for:** Real cheeses, plain nuts, simple crackers, natural popcorn

Sweets

- **Limit:** Low-sugar biscuits, cereal bars, novelty chocolate
 - **Swap for:** Homemade bars, oatcakes with honey, dried fruit, dark chocolate
-

Less-Processed Foods That Are Still Convenient

- Tinned fish, beans, lentils
 - Frozen fruit and veg
 - Wholegrain bread, wraps, crackers
 - Wholewheat pasta, noodles
 - Ready-to-eat grains
 - High-protein cereals with few ingredients
-

Meal Ideas

- Berries + natural yoghurt + nuts/seeds
- Overnight oats with fruit
- Wholegrain toast with eggs, beans or tinned fish
- Tuna salad with wholewheat pasta
- Crackers with cottage cheese or hummus
- Chicken/salad wrap
- Fish fingers (omega-3) with air-fried chips + peas
- Stir-fry with tofu/chicken + wholewheat noodles
- Ready meal + extra veg



Helpful Recipe Resources

- Beat The Budget – Healthy recipes on a budget
 - BHF – 7-day healthy meal plan
 - Jack Monroe – Budget-friendly recipes
-

Final Thoughts

Reducing UPFs isn't about perfection — it's about **small, sustainable changes** that support long-term health.

“Change needs to be sustainable – something you can do consistently right now and keep up forever.”