



From Pickles to Pop-Tarts

Understanding Processed vs. Ultra-Processed Foods

Humans have been “processing” food for millennia, using techniques like canning, drying, and fermenting to preserve harvests and make foods safer to eat. But today, the term *processed food* is often confused with a very different category: *ultra-processed foods* or *UPFs*. So, what’s the difference?

“Processed food” simply means food that has been altered from its natural state. This can be done by canning, pickling, smoking, curing or fermenting foods to improve food’s taste, nutrition, safety, convenience, or shelf life. Processed foods can be made at home in your kitchen using basic ingredients, without preservatives, emulsifiers, or other additives.

Examples include canned vegetables or beans, pickles, cheese, and fresh bread (made with just flour, water, yeast, and salt).

Ultra Processed foods, or UPFs are industrial products primarily made from substances not found in a typical home pantry, often containing additives like artificial colors, flavorings, emulsifiers (such as lecithin, gums, mono- and diglycerides), sweeteners, and other preservatives. These ingredients don’t just enhance taste — they improve texture, shelf life, and make the food irresistible.

Some UPFs may surprise you. Most store-bought breads contain emulsifiers; flavored yogurts have dyes; and breakfast cereals often contain malt flavor and synthetic antioxidants like BHT (Butylated Hydroxytoluene) to maintain freshness. Crackers contain high-fructose corn syrup, soy lecithin, and natural flavorings. Condiments such as ketchup, mayonnaise, salad dressings, and sriracha have emulsifiers and flavor enhancers. Nearly all frozen ready-to-eat meals contain all of the above. And of course the classic UPFs- soda, potato chips, and instant noodles. UPFs are essentially items you can’t make on your own.

How to Spot a UPF

- Short, familiar ingredient list → likely minimally processed
- Unfamiliar, chemical-sounding names → likely a UPF
- Can you make it at home? If not, it’s probably a UPF

Are Ultra-Processed Foods Always Bad? Some UPFs can still offer nutritional benefits. Certain plant-based milk alternatives, fortified cereals, or gluten substitutes can be useful in specific contexts. However, diets high in UPFs are generally linked with increased risks of obesity, heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and other chronic conditions. UPF-heavy diets tend to be low in fiber, high in calories and low in nutrients. But the issue isn’t just calories or fat. It’s the combination of low nutrient density with high amounts of additives (emulsifiers, flavors), added sugars, unhealthy fats, and sodium. UPFs are made to be ultra-delicious and addictive, making overeating easy.

Simple Swaps to Cut Down on UPFs:

- Flavored yogurt → Plain yogurt
- Commercial bread with preservatives and additives → Homemade bread or bread from a local bakery
- Sweetened breakfast cereals with artificial colors and flavors → Rolled oats or plain whole grains
- Fruit snacks with added sugars and preservatives → Fresh or dried fruit without additives
- Store-bought sauces with preservatives → Homemade tomato sauce (tomatoes, herbs)
- Packaged chips → Nuts, seeds, or a thinly sliced up potato drizzled with olive oil and tossed in the air fryer

While occasional UPFs aren’t harmful, relying on them everyday can negatively affect your long-term health. The goal isn’t perfection — it’s awareness. Choosing lightly processed foods more often can mean better nutrition, steadier energy, and improved well-being.

In short: Pickles? Yes. Pop-Tarts? Sometimes.
Your body will thank you!

Homemade Crackers



Enjoy homemade, non-UPF crackers made with simple ingredients free of additives!

Ingredients:

- 1 cup all-purpose flour (you can use whole wheat too)
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 2 tablespoons olive oil (or any oil you prefer)
- 1/4 cup water (add more if needed)
- Optional: herbs, spices, or seeds (like rosemary, garlic powder, sesame seeds) for extra flavor

Instructions:

1. Preheat your oven to 375°F (190°C).
2. In a bowl, mix the flour and salt.
3. Add the olive oil and water, then stir until a dough forms. If it's too dry, add a little more water, a teaspoon at a time.
4. Knead the dough lightly on a floured surface until smooth.
5. Roll the dough out as thin as possible (about 1/8 inch or thinner) to get crisp crackers.
6. Cut into desired shapes (squares, rectangles, or use a cookie cutter).
7. Place the pieces on a baking sheet lined with parchment paper.
8. Optional: sprinkle with your choice of herbs, salt, or seeds.
9. Bake for 10-15 minutes, or until golden and crisp. Keep an eye to avoid burning.
10. Let cool completely on a rack before storing in an airtight container.