Are All Ultra-Processed Foods Equally Harmful? What Women Need to Know Transcript

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Introduction to Ultra-Processed Foods

So why are ultra-processed foods considered harmful? Again, I'm going to read a list here of some of the disease conditions that have been noted in a number of different studies, both in the U. S.

and abroad, that people who eat more ultra processed foods are likely to experience, and that is oftentimes a 20 to 50 percent increased risk. and that is overall inflammation, all-cause mortality, which is the chance that you will die over a specific time frame.

And that seems to be about 20% increased in people who eat a lot of ultra-processed foods. It's about 10% increase per serving per day of ultraprocessed food.

Have you made it past menopause, or are you going through it now? I'm Dr. Pat McShane, and on the Women's HealthSpan Voices podcast, I'll guide you through the health challenges of the menoppausal years and beyond, guiding the way to thriving in this powerful era of your womanhood.

Hello and welcome to Women's Health Fan Voices. I'm Dr. Pat McShane, and today I thought we would take a little bit of a hazardous journey, a deep dive into ultra-processed foods.

Podcast Intro and Episode Overview

If you're at all like me, you are reading about these all the time and how harmful they may be, but there's a lot of controversy around this and a lots of problems defining what we mean by ultra processed foods in the first instance.

At the very least, ultra-processed foods compromise about 50% of our caloric intake. And although addiction to ultra processed foods, which is a whole other subject on its own, is not as high in we older women, there still are a sizable number of people who heavily depend upon ultra process foods or might even be considered addicted to them.

So this is a real issue, the way that we currently eat. So let's start with some definitions, and there are several different ones, but I'm going to read a general description, which is that Group 1 foods are those which are unprocessed or minimally processed, And those are naturally occurring foods without additives.

Group 2 foods have culinary ingredients added to them for processing such as salt, vegetable oil, sugar, or butter.

What Counts as Ultra-Processed Food

Group 3 are processed, which is additives meant to improve taste or shelf life, such a canned goods or cured meat. And then group four are considered the ultra-processed, and those are industrially created foods that include ingredients you wouldn't find in a home kitchen, such as frozen meals, packaged desserts, flavored yogurts, plant-based meat substitutes.

And what characterizes ultra-processed foods for the most part are a lot more sugar, fat, and salt than occur in natural or minimally processed foods.

These foods also typically contain artificial dyes, sweeteners, emulsifiers, and preservatives. And then, of course, there are the chemicals that are included in the packaging, whether that's plastic or cans or styrofoam and so on.

So there's even less known about those things that we ingest when we eat processed foods. So one analyst I read said if something has more than five ingredients in it, it's probably going to be considered ultra-processed.

And from an overall dietary perspective, the foods that are of the most concern are things like processed meats and sodas, which are what we eat the more stuff that would be consider ultra processed.

How Ultra-Processed Foods Affect the Body

Most of what I've been reading, probably you also, speaks in a negative fashion about ultra-processed foods, and I'll go through a lot of those foods are supposed to be doing bad to us, but let's move over for a second and talk about mechanisms.

And what it's thought that ultra processed foods can do includes this long list, which is it can raise certain fatty acids. These foods can infiltrate our muscles with fat.

They can be endocrine disruptors, they are pro-inflammatory, and they alter our microbiomes, especially the preservatives and the additives. Besides all of that, these foods are typically intended to be addictive because they are hyper palatable.

The serving sizes are large, if we're talking about foods in one serving size container. They are, typically, a soft texture and eaten quickly, so you don't have a feeling of fullness after eating them.

And they are typically protein poor and fiber poor. So again, we don't have a sense of satiation after eating them. And besides all that, they're very ubiquitous.

They're are very easily found in a gas station and they typically cheaper. There don' require refrigeration oftentimes, and there very handy for our lifestyle.

We've come to rely upon various indications from the FDA and so on about food safety, but this arena has been wholly neglected by both the U. S. and European food labeling and food inspection services.

So why are ultra-processed foods considered harmful?

Health Risks Linked to Ultra-Processed Foods

Again, I'm going to read a list here of some of the disease conditions that have been noted in a number of different studies, both in the U. S. and abroad, that people who eat more ultra processed foods are likely to experience, and that is oftentimes a 20 to 50 percent increased risk.

and that is overall inflammation, all-cause mortality, which is the chance that you will die over a specific time frame. And that seems to be about 20% increased in people who eat a lot of ultra-processed foods.

It's about 10% increase per serving per day of ultraprocessed food. Cardiovascular mortality. High blood pressure. cancer noted in the UK Biobank, anxiety and depression, obesity, of course, diabetes, sleep disorders, and that blacks are especially high risk out of the MESA study data.

I frequently like to quote Michael Pollan who said, eat food, not too much, mostly plants. And again, the idea here is to prioritize whole and minimally processed foods and avoid processed meats and sugar sweetened beverages in particular.

Another way of thinking about this is to add protein and fiber to our diet, and often the ultra processed foods are not going to be particularly high in either of these components.

Vitamins and colorful foods, as we've heard from many of our podcasters over the last year, One of the problems with our current system is that the nutritional labeling mentions the ingredients that went into a food, and we don't

really know very much about how processing changes that impact on our bodies.

Choosing Healthier Foods and Practical Takeaways

So that's something that may say that it's, you know, all potatoes and a little bit of fat and pulverized to a pulp and then reconfigured in some fashion to form a potato chip-ish creation.

You know, do we know that the potatoes that went in there still have the same nutritional properties as the potatos that we might be eating on our plate at dinner with just a little bit of butter on top of them?

So we don't really know a lot about that. And we certainly know that things get differently altered in our system, in out gut, and impact our everything.

Our satiety, our endocrine function that our gut does, then our microbiome. So hopefully we'll get more information about this over the next few years.

One piece of good news was recently presented at a nutrition meeting in July, and that looked at several studies analyzing about 200,000 people and what they reported to be eating.

And they divided healthy and unhealthy foods, whether they be ultra-processed or not, Definition of healthy but ultra-processed might include something like whole grain cereals or plant-based dairy substitutes.

And then the unhealthy ultra processed would be fast food, packaged snacks, and sodas. and what they found was that people who ate the healthy side, whether they be unprocessed or ultra-process, tended to have less cardiovascular mortality, diabetes, and all-cause mortality which as we just discussed is the risk of dying.

So that kind of helps us to avoid the most worrisome items and stay with the healthier items, even if we can't be home cooking nutritious food meals all the time for ourselves and our families.

There are several levels on which things can be done about this. Some of it is legislative, and I'm not going to go into that, but there is a movement to kind back out some of the tactics that have been used by the food industry.

to try to get us to eat more of this stuff. Probably, for today anyway, the thing we can think about is what I just mentioned, which is, what we could personally do for ourselves and the people we might be shopping and cooking for.

which is to, again, aim for protein and fiber, which most of we older women are deficient in, and try to stay away from things with a lot of salt, fat and sugar in them.

So that's basic overall recommendation for my take on ultra-processed foods, which is a complicated subject. It comes up all the time in my reading and probably yours.

And I hope this kind of information has been useful. So if it has, please like and subscribe and tell your friends about this so we might get more information out there for women to have longer, healthier lives.

Thanks so much. Thanks for listening to the women's health span voices podcast. If today's episode spoke to you, follow the show and share it with a friend ready to take charge of her health and please leave a review.

It helps more women find us.