

Our Head of Nutrition, Dr Pippa Gibson RNutr, has put this paper together to give you some re-assurance of our approach to ensure the wellbeing of all our customers.

At Accent Catering our business is built on cooking customers meals from scratch, and using the best ingredients possible to create healthy and nutritious meals for hungry customers of all ages. We are constantly bombarded with nutritional information across all platforms in life, and in recent months we have seen a significant rise in the awareness around ultra-processed foods (UPFs).

While UPFs have been around for decades, there is an ever-increasing quantity of UPFs in our diets due to processing and formulation of foods, which have grown more complex over time. In addition, the sudden rise in interest around these foods and our health is hard to ignore with many news channels and social media sites quoting scaremongering headlines, many of which are misleading or misrepresentative of the facts.



So, how do you know if a food is ultra-processed or not?

All foods can be categorised according to the "NOVA classification system" as follows:

1. Unprocessed and minimally processed foods
2. Processed culinary ingredients
3. Processed foods
4. Ultra-processed foods

1. Unprocessed & minimally processed foods

The term unprocessed food is used synonymously for natural raw ingredients that are obtained from the edible part of plants (e.g., fruits, vegetables, grains, seeds, nuts, tubers, roots), animals (e.g., meat, offal, eggs, milk), and fish that have been taken straight from nature, or have been minimally modified or preserved. Unprocessed foods are not always directly edible; some of the foods require further processing in order to ensure it is safe to consume, or to improve digestibility i.e. through the use of heat to cook foods. Since the preparation of these raw materials into palatable foods and dishes can be done at home, they are considered as unprocessed or natural foods.

Minimally processed foods are obtained after minor industrial processing steps that exclusively aim to increase the shelf life, storage stability and enhance the edibility and digestibility of a food without changing its major composition and properties. Such processes include drying, chilling and freezing, crushing and grinding, pasteurization, non-alcoholic fermentation as well as packaging.

Unprocessed and minimally processed foods are a broad group of products considered to have beneficial nutritional compositions (e.g. energy, protein, carbohydrates, fibre, vitamins and minerals), but they also have in common the lack of added ingredients before they are eaten or used in kitchens to prepare meals and dishes.

2. Processed culinary ingredients

Processed culinary ingredients are foods such as plant oils, animal fats (e.g., butter), sugar, syrup, honey, starch and salt, which are extracted and purified from group 1 foods by special processes such as pressing, grinding, milling and refining. As such, these products exhibit extremely unbalanced nutritional values as they typically consist of only one macronutrient in high purity (mainly fat or sugar). They are therefore considered ingredients for cooking delicious and nutritious meals, rather than individual food products that you would eat on their own.

The products in this group are often produced industrially or in small artisanal enterprises rather than by the consumer themselves. It is important to note, however, that it does not include ingredients that underwent further modifications, such as hydrogenated fats (i.e. margarine) or modified starches.



3. Processed foods

Processed foods are produced by combining two or more food products from groups 1 and 2 and applying further processing methods such as baking, cooking, smoking, non-alcoholic fermentation as well as packaging. Many products can be seen as modified versions of group 1 foods (e.g., cheese, ham, canned vegetables), whereas others such as bread are rather new categories of food.

Processed foods have an increased palatability compared to group 1 products. They can be part of meal or a dish or consumed as is. The energy densities and nutritional values of some of these products can be rather unbalanced, depending on the amounts of added fat, sugar and salt.



4. Ultra-processed foods

The term ultra-processed food was introduced by the developers of the NOVA classification to group a broad range of products that are considered unhealthy due to high energy densities and low micronutrient contents. This group is defined as **"formulations of ingredients, mostly of exclusively industrial use, that result from a series of industrial processes"** (Monteiro et al., 2019).

The common ground of these products is the exclusively industrial production and the formulation from several ingredients rather than being **"ultra-processed"**, as the number and intensity of processes varies greatly among products. The above NOVA classification, whilst informative, is a crude classification of foods through simplistic terms especially when you consider not all UPFs are bad for us.

For instance, fruit yoghurt and some sweetened breakfast cereals are hardly more processed than their counterparts in groups 1 and 3, except for the mixing with the additional ingredients. More extensively processed products such as protein bars, infant formula and plant-based alternatives such as meat analogues or dairy alternatives are generally considered healthy, or have significant potential to supplement a healthy balanced diet.

Further, if we take dairy alternative milks as an example, these products are used by people looking for alternatives to dairy milk for varying reasons, including dietary requirements, cultural beliefs, or environmental reasons. The simple act of making a milk alternative from a bean, nut or grain means that there will inevitably be higher levels of food processing in order to make the product as a suitable and satisfying replacement.

Some people may pursue a diet that excludes UPFs and argue that you could simply make your own bean/nut/

grain milk alternative at home. These homemade varieties could be considered nutritionally insufficient and could potentially lead to malnutrition if not carefully monitored. Why? Because it is the very fact that milk alternatives are ultra processed which makes it a nutritionally sound option.

The best milk alternatives are fortified with calcium, iodine, vitamins B12 and D in order to make them nutritionally equal to standard cow's milk, and these are not ingredients which are found in your kitchen cupboards, and perhaps highlights the limitations of the NOVA classification system where nutrient content of a food is not taken into consideration.

It is important to remember that UPFs do play a role in healthy and balanced diets.

Processing foods is a method we use in an urban environment to ensure safe consumption of food, whilst living the lifestyle we are accustomed to. Hence, the focus should be on limiting high fat, high sugar, and high salt foods, rather than a blanket UPF ban.

Summary

As the Head of Nutrition for Accent Catering, I understand the concerns around the use of UPFs. It is important to recognise that a healthy and balanced diet can encompass all foods, including UPFs, and perhaps one of the most important factors to consider when creating a healthy and balanced diet is not what you need to take out from your diet, but actually what can you add in, and the balance of your overall diet rather than the individual foods you consume here and there.

Therefore, when consuming UPFs which may be higher in fat, salt or sugar, I recommend trying to pair it with plenty of group 1 NOVA classified unprocessed and minimally processed foods in order to benefit your body.

Accent Catering have a very proud heritage of cooking food from fresh (98.7% from fresh accredited by the Soil Association). We do not use any jars of sauce mixes or packet mixes which ensures we know exactly what is going in our dishes. Coupled with this, when we develop our menus, we carefully consider the balance of products across each week.

For example, we always offer two vegetables with the hot main course, as well as a salad bar full of simple and composite salads for customers to choose from. Home-made yoghurts, fresh fruits (cut and whole), and a range of reduced sugar desserts are always available across the weekly menus on our pupil menus.

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Reference

Monteiro et al. Ultra-processed foods: What they are and how to identify them. *Public Health Nutrition* 2019 22(5): 936-941. doi:10.1017/S1368980018003762