

Ultra-processed foods not easy to ID

Study tests ability to spot nutritional quality

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PROVIDENCE, RI – Here’s a pop quiz: Which of the following foods are considered ultra-processed according to researchers, and what is their nutritional quality?

- Fresh Express Chopped Asian Salad Kit
- Utz Original Potato Chips
- 365 Unsalted Mini Twists [pretzels]
- Del Monte 100% Juice Fruit Cocktail

Two of the four entries are ultra-processed. Two are considered to have high nutritional quality, and two are considered to have low nutritional quality. [Answers are at the bottom of this story.]

The bigger questions are: How easily can the public discern what an ultra-processed food is, and how can you figure out a food’s nutritional quality? Understanding those answers is important as ultra-processed foods are increasingly linked to rising cancer rates.

University of Rhode Island professor Kathleen Melanson and four other researchers from URI sought to test the ability of Americans to discern which foods are ultra-processed and which have high nutritional quality, compared with the ability of similarly surveyed populations in Europe and South America.

A total of 422 Americans [with a mean age of 26] were asked to define ultra-processed foods and then classify 24 food items, from ketchup to grapes, as ultra-processed or not. They were also asked how confident they were in their answers. Then they were asked to describe how they decided if the food was ultra-processed. Finally, they were asked to rate the item’s healthiness.

Of those surveyed in the United States, mostly from the Northeast and mid-Atlantic, the mean score of correctly identifying what is considered an ultra-processed food was 67%.



No one should feel bad about having a hard time identifying what an ultra-processed food is, because there is no clear definition.

WHEELER COWPERTHWAIT/PROVIDENCE JOURNAL

“I think this is something on people’s radar more than ever, rising to the top,” Melanson said. “Not long ago, many people didn’t recognize the term ‘UPF,’ but now it seems like a household term. It’s on the radar of researchers, policy-makers, all over the world.”

The study, titled “How young adults in the United States understand and conceptualise ultra-processed foods,” was published in the Journal of Nutritional Science and was coauthored by Alexandra Larcom, Ingrid Lofgren, Matthew Delmonico and Amanda Missimer.

Ingredients vs. ‘food matrix’

In their research, Melanson and her team asked participants to guess which food items fell into which categories. Participants were also asked how they decided which food belonged in which category and how they thought about each food grouping.

Research in South America and Europe looked at what consumers identify as ultra-processed foods, but not at nutritional quality, something that Melanson’s paper looked at specifically.

The Americans in Melanson’s study tended to look first to ingredients to determine if something was an ultra-processed

food, whereas participants in the South American and European research tended to “think of the destruction of the food matrix,” including all the refining and milling that goes on with the core ingredients.

The “food matrix” is how far an ingredient has been taken from its original form. Bleached white flour, for example, has been taken much further from its “food matrix” than whole wheat flour.

Among the things that surprised Melanson were how healthy Americans rated things like sausage, pretzels and chocolate milk, considered to have a low nutritional value, compared with salad mix, almond milk and yogurt, which all have higher nutritional value but were rated lower by the participants.

No clear definition to help consumers

No one should feel bad about having a hard time identifying what an ultra-processed food is, because there is no clear definition.

The rubric Melanson and her colleagues used, “NOVA,” was developed by Brazilian researchers. The framework is a “very clearly delineated tool for research,” Melanson said, and it isn’t

helpful for consumers.

In fact, no definition of ultra-processed foods is easy to use or consumer-facing. That has become a larger problem as health concerns, from cancer risk to weight gain, caused by ultra-processed foods have proliferated.

“NOVA is not designed for consumer recommendations,” Melanson said. “It’s the kind of work that needs to be done, moving forward.”

Wait, salad mix is and pretzels aren’t?

The Fresh Express Chopped Asian Salad Kit is, under the NOVA rubric, an ultra-processed food because the dressing has so many added ingredients. However, its total nutritional value is very high.

At the same time, the NOVA method does not consider potato chips an ultra-processed food, although they have low nutritional quality. That’s because they have very few added ingredients. The same goes for the unsalted pretzels, not an ultra-processed food, despite being made with highly refined ingredients.

The NOVA framework doesn’t consider the “food matrix.”

When vitamins or minerals are added, something usually gets the ultra-processed label, even though the addition may be healthy.

“Some of these ingredients are more concerning than others,” Melanson said. “Adding dietary fibers, oxidants, probiotics, kicks it into the ultra-processed food category, in the same collection with foods that have several artificial, industrially processed ingredients of concern.”

Pop quiz answer sheet

- Fresh Express Chopped Asian Salad Kit – Ultra-processed, high nutritional quality
- Utz Original Potato Chips – Not ultra-processed, low nutritional quality
- 365 Unsalted Mini Twists [pretzels] – Not ultra-processed, low nutritional quality
- Del Monte 100% Juice Fruit Cocktail – Ultra-processed, high nutritional quality

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