

# SHOULD THE FOCUS BE ON ULTRA-PROCESSED FOOD, OR DO WE REALLY MEAN 'DISCRETIONARY' OR 'SOMETIMES' FOOD?

## Definition

Generally, the term **ultra-processed food (UPF)** is used to describe a food produced with several ingredients, including ingredients and additives not normally found in home kitchens.

## Foods captured

While this definition captures foods that the Australian Dietary Guidelines (ADGs) recommend we limit (think packaged snacks, confectionary, ice cream), it also captures foods from the core food groups, which the ADGs recommend we eat everyday. This includes:

- commercially produced white, wholegrain and wholemeal bread
- some wholegrain breakfast cereals
- flavoured yoghurt, including fruit yoghurt
- milk drinks
- muesli
- baked beans.

There is an increase in nutrition and health advice for consumers to limit intake of UPFs. Concerns centre around these foods being highly palatable, and containing high amounts of 'risk' nutrients (sugar, saturated fat).

## Foods not captured

The definition of ultra-processed food **does not** capture foods such as

- butter
- cream
- sugar
- homemade cakes, pastries, biscuits and jams
- pastries, including croissants
- fruit in sugar syrup

These are all discretionary food choices, based on the ADGs.

## Evidence

While we should limit intake of certain UPFs for long-term health, research shows that not all ultra-processed food products should be universally restricted (think wholegrain bread and breakfast cereal).

Source: Fang, Z. et al. (2024). Association of ultra-processed food consumption with all cause and cause specific mortality: population based cohort study. *BMJ*, Article 385. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj-2023-078476>

## Key message

Nutrition is ever-evolving, but the messaging around UPFs is confusing. We must continue to promote the ADGs, and its categorisation of 'core foods' and 'discretionary' foods. If in doubt, the nutrition information panel can help guide food choices. While not perfect, the Health Star Rating can assist with specific food selection. Not all UPFs are discretionary food choices: some of these foods are nutritious and help us with healthy eating in our busy lives. Food technology can play an important role in producing nutritious, sustainable food.