



A Dietitian's Guide to Unpacking the Processed Food Panic with Elizabeth Ward, MS, RD (ep – 78)

[00:00:02] **Liz Ward** Most of the studies that have been done on ultra-processed foods and their health effects are observational in nature, which means they can only show an association. They cannot prove causation. You cannot say from an observational study that ultra-processed foods cause you to die younger.

[00:00:25] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** Processed foods are one of the most talked about and most misunderstood topics in nutrition. From headlines warning about ultra-processed products to simplified rules like, if you can't pronounce it, don't eat it. It's no wonder that it feels difficult to make the right choices for yourself and your long-term health. The reality is, nutrition is rarely that black and white. And when it comes to processed foods, the conversation deserves more nuance than we usually get. That's why I'm so glad to be joined today by Liz Ward, a registered dietitian, author, and nutrition consultant who's spent decades helping people make realistic, evidence-based choices. Together, we'll define what processed really means, explore the NOVA classification system, and dig into how processed foods actually could fit into your life. This has been like a long time coming. I'm grateful that you're here because you have a reputation for helping people make realistic evidence-based food choices. And you've done that for a long time.

[00:01:29] **Liz Ward** I've been a dietitian for decades. I really am into myth busting, especially with this topic of processed foods. There's another headline to contend with. And the conversation is so nuanced and consumers are so confused. And also health professionals are confused about what to tell their patients and their clients.

[00:01:50] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** You're right about dietitians as myth busters. There's always themes about what people are talking about, and right now there's a lot about processed foods, ultra-processed foods. Can you talk about what processed food means and the range between minimally to ultra-processed?

[00:02:06] **Liz Ward** So a processed food is anything that is not in its natural state. So let's say an apple is an unprocessed food. Applesauce with added sugar is a little more processed and then apple juice is probably the most processed. The more we do something to a food and we add things to it, the more processed it becomes. There are four categories of processed foods that are most widely talked about. One is a minimally processed food that I just talked about anything in nature. You can cook it. You can dry it. You can grind it. You just can't add anything to it. And then there's the ultra process. They're designed to make us eat more so on and so forth. And again, even that claim has to be unpacked.

[00:02:52] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** I think it's important to know that there's something floating around folks are talking about, and I'm not sure if they truly know what it is, but it's NOVA classification. Can you explain how that fits into the conversation?

[00:03:06] **Liz Ward** Sure can, because NOVA is a food classification system that's being used in just about every study that looks at the effects of ultra-processed foods on health. So NOVA, is a system that was dreamt up by a Brazilian professor who deals with these issues in 2009, and NOVA divides processed foods or foods into levels of processing. So, as I mentioned earlier, category one is like a banana or a grape or apple or a nut. And then all the way up to category four. So in between minimally processed foods, and then there is a category called processed foods which might have canned tuna fish in it. And then there's the ultra-processed. They supposedly, according to NOVA, are made with ingredients that you wouldn't find in your kitchen. So the other thing that goes on with NOVA is there's no consideration of nutrition whatsoever. So when we start to demonize foods, we have to be really careful because this does not involve nutrition at all. It just is the level of processing. The NOVA system is subjective. And therein lies one of its problems. It's a great idea in the sense that we need to bring processing to the fore, but when we're doing studies with a system that has flaws, are those studies totally accurate?

[00:04:37] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** And then the level of subjectivity, I think it just needs to be understood. And this is probably the source of some confusion, like the headline, ultra-processed foods increase risk of mortality. That's really scary and alarming. So I'd love to hear about what is going on right now in the research.

[00:04:57] **Liz Ward** Well, I'm pretty sure that study was an observational study, and that brings up a perfect point. Most of the studies that have been done on ultra-processed foods and their health effects are observational in nature.

Which means they can only show an association, they cannot prove causation. You cannot say from an observational study that ultra-processed food cause you to die younger. There is some sort of an association to be studied further.

[00:05:26] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** It's important to know that not all food processing is negative, and what I hear over and over is processed foods are bad, processed food should be avoided completely. But I think we really need to discuss this from a public health perspective. Can you talk about some examples, say about like fortification? That's an important conversation.

[00:05:46] **Liz Ward** It's a really important conversation, because grains are, let me just start with the fact that they're very affordable and if we could pack more nutrition into grains. We really are, you know, doing it a service to people. So the fortification of grains with folic acid which is just one B vitamin, but a very important one has been literally a public health milestone. Since that came to pass, since that was law, the incidence of neural tube defects during pregnancy has gone down. Now, a neural tube defect happens in the first 30 days after a woman conceives. And it's often a time when she does not know she's pregnant, so she's not taking her prenatal. Maybe she forgot her multivitamin, take it every day with the folic acid in it. And these grains are providing the folic acid. It takes to help significantly reduce the risk of neural-tube defects, which are irreversible, sometimes deadly, and certainly something that is a disability for a child. So all you did was put you know a B vitamin in grains, and it's wonderful. The other thing about grains is they also have iron added to them. And iron deficiency anemia is rampant amongst children and young women in this country and of course around the world, and fortifying grains with iron is another way to ensure health. So the other example I use which I love is vitamin D added to milk. Vitamin D is not found in a lot of foods yet. We know how important it is. And so having that in milk is just fabulous. And of course with all the plant milks adding the vitamins and the minerals back to them is really necessary to, let's say with soy milk, to make it the nutritional equivalent to dairy milk. So it's a great way to ensure better nutrition, especially for people with limited resources.

[00:07:43] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** Yes, and this sends me on a nutrition rant that I've been on for a while, which is a lot of my clients do plant-based milks. There's this trend going on right now, pushing back against processed foods, where you'll read the label, and it says two ingredients. So it's got almonds and it's water. And people are like, oh, that's better because it's less processed. And I'm like, look at the label and tell me how much calcium is in there. And if it only has two ingredients, then it is not fortified. And they'll look at the label, and it'll say anywhere between zero and 40. And then I say, look at the fortified one and it has 400 milligrams of calcium. A lot of my clients need between

1,000 and 1,200 for reference. The fortification is critical. And if you don't have it, you're missing a very important opportunity for nutrition.

[00:08:35] **Liz Ward** Especially with the plant milks. Plant milks fall into category four. They are considered ultra-processed foods. And I think a lot of people that drink them would be surprised by that, because they're so natural or they're not from dairy. Just know that you're lumping all these foods together in that category four is dangerous because a lot those foods, including the fortified plant milks are good for you. The NOVA classification on its own does not necessarily guarantee that you are eating a nutrient-rich balanced diet. It just assumes that the food is low in nutritional value just because it's in category four and considered ultra-processed.

[00:09:17] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** That is such a great point. Well, you are a myth buster and I am a myth-buster. So I want to run through a couple of things that I hear all the time. So this is one thing I hear constantly. If you look at a label and it has a really long ingredient list, you shouldn't eat it.

[00:09:34] **Liz Ward** A long ingredient list doesn't mean anything. It could mean that there are lots of vitamins and minerals, sometimes fibers added to the food. And if those ingredients don't bother you, it doesn't in terms of like any digestive problems or allergic reactions or anything else, then you shouldn't be daunted by a long ingredient lists, but you have to know what you're looking for before you put the product back on the shelf just because it has a long ingredients list.

[00:10:04] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** I feel the same way. I remember the first time that somebody said that to me, it was years ago when I worked in a great of cancer center and I was holding a can of soup that we were going to make at lunch at the center. And they were like, oh, I don't want to do those long ingredients list. And I said, well, let's read this label together. And it had a few different whole grains like barley and rice and then it had whole bunch of veggies and then it a whole bunch herbs and spices. And so it was a very long list, but every single thing in there was a whole food.

[00:10:32] **Liz Ward** That's such a great point. And just cause it's in a can, you know, doesn't mean it's any less worthy. You have to really look at each food on its own merits.

[00:10:43] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** You do. And if you look at it and you're still confused, reaching out to a health care provider, we can help you interpret it. You don't have to do it on your own. When life gets busy, convenience doesn't have to mean compromise. Orgain protein powders, shakes, and bars deliver

high quality nutrition in a simple, accessible way. Whether you're blending up a smoothie, grabbing a bar between meetings, or stocking up on pantry staples, Orgain helps you stay nourished without overthinking it. Learn more at Orgain.com. So there's this thing floating around right now that bothers me. If you can't pronounce it on a label, it's bad for you and you shouldn't eat it. So how do you approach that?

[00:11:29] **Liz Ward** Oh gosh, that's one of the worst food rules that I've heard. Just because there's a lot of acid in there, like ascorbic acid, and that's actually vitamin C. So again, you have to know what you're looking for and investigate each one of those ingredients. And if it's a food that you want to eat on a regular basis, then invest the time. Take a picture of the label, find out what it is. If you're okay with it, buy it and keep buying it. And this will increase your education about what's in there. A lot of times it's a vitamin or a mineral.

[00:12:03] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** Lot of times, and they are like more scientific hard-to-pronounce words, but that doesn't write an automatic no. So I'd love to hear more about frequency of ultra-processed foods. What's the difference between having them all the time versus occasionally? 80 percent versus 50? What do you suggest?

[00:12:20] **Liz Ward** Neither one of us are recommending a steady diet of ultra-processed foods. But that doesn't mean that a diet with processed and ultra-processed food, as long as it's balanced in so many other ways, is not good for you. It could be perfectly fine for you. I eat processed and ultraprocessed foods every day. The cereal that I eat in the morning is considered ultra-processed by NOVA. I eat it every day, because it has nutritional value. You know, we really need to keep in mind that we need to start with the framework of, I'm going to try to eat a diet that is low in sodium, low in added sugars, low in saturated fat, light number of calories for me, and also rich in fiber. So if we start with that premise, a lot of ultra-processed foods just kind of fall off. They're not involved on a daily basis because you can't make those goals. Will you look at it that way? And then we say, you know what? A lot of these ultra-processed foods are good for you, like the cereal I eat every morning, the tofu with calcium sulfate, which is also ultra-processed. How do those fit in? We pick the most nutritionally dense ones of those processed and ultra-processed food and work them in. And of course, sometimes we eat just for pure enjoyment and that's okay too, but not all day long every day to the extent where we don't meet our nutrient goals.

[00:13:45] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** You did say something earlier that gets left out of this conversation a lot. I was doing my supervised practice internship. I was at a big VA in the West side of Chicago and there was a lot of people that had no

food. They were home insecure. They didn't have transportation. And it really opened my eyes. Not everybody has the privilege of just eating perfectly cooked whole foods, local everything. And so I don't want people that are having access issues to feel this crushing guilt. How do you approach that conversation?

[00:14:16] **Liz Ward** When I'm talking to dietitians and other health professionals, I say, don't forget that there are a lot of people, and now more than ever, with very, very limited resources, very limited budgets, who live without refrigeration, who live without food sometimes, and these ultra-processed foods are a lifesaver for them. Like I said, the enriched grains, the fortified milk, these are relatively inexpensive foods. How about the shelf stable things? So everything in a can that can be maybe microwaved or warmed up in some other way. Let's not look down on this. We have to consider that people do not have the time. Lots of people are working two jobs. They're not spending four or five hours a day making everything from scratch. This is the reality of the situation and ultra-processed and processed foods to the rescue here.

[00:15:12] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** Before we continue, let's pause for some nutrition news. A new study published in the BMJ reviewed 14 meta-analyses. That's nearly 10 million people. The strongest evidence connected ultra-processed foods to heart-related deaths, type 2 diabetes, and mental health concerns. The quality of the evidence in the study varies and most of the studies were observational. So researchers are still studying the exact why and how. The overall picture is that diets high in ultra-processed foods are tied to worse health outcomes. But we need more rigorous research and more randomized controlled trials before making any strong claims. What is high? And how do we correctly classify ultra-processed foods? The researchers noted that many ultra-process foods tend to be high in calories, salt, sugar, and unhealthy fats, but low in fiber, vitamins, and minerals. But what about foods that I recommend all the time, like fortified whole grain cereal, tofu, protein powder, or canned fish? The span of what qualifies as ultra-processed also needs to be taken into consideration. And this is exactly why today's conversation is important because not all processing is bad and context matters. Let's get back to Liz. And actually I want to run through a few good versus bad foods and some ultra-processed foods. Maybe we start with breakfast cereals. How do you approach it?

[00:16:42] **Liz Ward** I approach it every day with a great gusto. I choose one that's whole grain, and it has very, very little added sugar. So that's the way I like it. Again, that doesn't mean that you can't have a bowl of sugary cereal that's fortified with nutrients as long as the rest of your day is not high in sugar. It's all relative.

[00:17:03] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** A lot of my clients ask me about individual foods, but what I say every single time is, it's hard for me to answer questions about individual foods without looking at your entire day. Could you do a sugary cereal within, let's say we have a goal of 25 grams or less of added sugar? Absolutely. If you have a really high sugar day, we might look at changing up the type of cereal you're having. The context of what you do in general is really important. How do you approach protein bars and shakes? Because there's a thousand of them on the market and they're highly processed foods.

[00:17:36] **Liz Ward** Yes, they are highly processed foods, but they're also highly nutritious foods. And for people that are active and on the go and need that extra protein, they absolutely serve a purpose. You don't want your whole day to be protein shakes and protein bars, because then you're not getting enough fruits and vegetables, let's say, or whole grains. So again, it's how does that food fit in for you? Do you need these foods?

[00:18:01] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** It can be the quickest, easiest way to get nutrition. I recommend shakes all the time and protein powders. I know that that's something that's close to your heart too.

[00:18:13] **Liz Ward** My mother, three years before she died, her appetite was very small. And of course, the dietitian in me was using every trick up my sleeve to get her to have more calories because as time went on, she ate a smaller volume of food. Protein powder was a lifesaver. I mean, it really helped her for many, many years. So I'm a big fan.

[00:18:36] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** Yeah, I use it with, I would say 100 percent of my clients, especially during treatment. It can be a complete lifesaver. So yes, processed food and much more realistic and concentrated for people that need it. And there's a lot of folks in that category that could really benefit. How do you approach like deli meat or processed meat? This one's a little bit more complex perhaps.

[00:18:57] **Liz Ward** It is more complex and, you know, in a couple of the observational studies, one was about colorectal cancer and the other was about type 2 diabetes. Deli meats and processed meats like hot dogs, bacon, things like that, sausages, rose to the top in terms of being the culprits. Not the culprit, but one of the culprits. In terms of an association with colorectal cancer and an increased risk of type 2 diabetes, they tend to be higher in sodium. They also contain sodium nitrite, which is potential carcinogen as it gets converted in the body. Again, does that mean that the hot dog that you had at the picnic last week

is gonna give you cancer? No, it's relative. So it was the people who ate the most of those, the most processed meats, not any processed meats.

[00:19:47] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** It's really important to look at the risk as a whole. But then there's a category that I actually participate in quite often, frozen meals. Where are you at with those?

[00:19:56] **Liz Ward** Well, again, those in the last two studies that I talked about, they were also nailed as potential problems. It depends on the frozen meal. How much salt is in it maybe, how much added sugars in it, what kind of preservatives maybe that. We don't know exactly what the mechanisms are. We only know there was an association. I'm sure if you take a frozen meal with about 300 calories and then you add a fruit you're in a much better place than eating a frozen meal that has 700 calories in it and really no additional fiber or any other nutrients.

[00:20:32] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** A very challenging category of foods to group together. But the ones that I try to choose and are like relatively lower calorie, maybe I'll boost them up with some more veggies or fruit. I'm like chopping up tofu and putting them in. And when you read the ingredient label, they're whole foods based. And so the category of frozen or convenience foods is vast.

[00:20:52] **Liz Ward** It is vast, and I think foods like frozen soy-based burgers, like getting a bad rap. We keep telling people, don't eat so much red meat, and then we're like, okay, but don't the soy burger because it's processed. It's ridiculous.

[00:21:05] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** And then I know you have such a fun example of an important category cookies. Tell me your cookie story, Liz.

[00:21:14] **Liz Ward** So you're making a cookie at home, and NOVA says, okay, processed foods are made from ingredients that you don't have in your kitchen or made with some fancy food processing techniques. So you're making chocolate chip cookies at home with butter, with white flour, which is processed, and that cookie, according to NOVA, is okay, whereas the cookie that you buy in the store is not okay. And so what you're doing is giving the cookie that you made at home, this halo effect. I didn't buy them in the store, they're okay for me to eat, well, not in large quantities. Of course you can make homemade cookies and have one or two a day if that fits into your goals or your health requirements. But how different really is that nutritionally from what you're getting in a package?

[00:22:03] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** Liz, this has been like the most interesting conversation. If you could leave listeners with one final thought about processed and ultra-processed foods, what would it be?

[00:22:13] **Liz Ward** It would be read beyond the headlines. Don't repost anything that you haven't read the study for. You were talking about earlier, you go straight to the study, so do I. And even I don't always understand the study and I still won't repost anything or push that idea forward in social media until I fully understand it and I have good perspective.

[00:22:37] **Dr. Ginger Hultin** Thank you so much for this. It was so interesting and what a critical conversation to have in the world right now. Liz reminded us that foods aren't simply good or bad. Sometimes processing makes foods even more nutritious and more accessible. And what really matters is how those foods fit into your overall diet and lifestyle. So next time you're standing in the grocery aisle, remember, read beyond the headlines and instead, read the labels. As always, consider your own health goals and don't let fear drive your food choices. A huge thank you to Liz Ward for joining me, and thank you for listening to The Good Clean Nutrition podcast. If you enjoyed this episode, please follow, rate and leave a review. See you next time.

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