

## “Processed Foods: What Every Healthcare Professional Should Know”

Webinar Questions Answered by Elizabeth Ward, MS, RDN

- How is it that packaged cookies are protective? What is the nutritional quality?

I'm not sure what you're referring to, but I did give an example of two cookies, one cooked at home and one that was packaged and had an emulsifier, colors, and possibly more sodium. The point was that cookies made at home and those made in a factory have just about the same nutritional content in terms of calories, fat, and carbs, and that processing doesn't change that fact, and Nova doesn't account for it, either.

- What counts as a packaged savory snack?

In the type 2 diabetes study, researchers counted the following as a packaged savory snack: Fat-free popcorn; fat-free, light crackers, and regular crackers. See this link for the other food categories used in the study: [https://diabetesjournals.figshare.com/articles/figure/Ultra-processed\\_food\\_consumption\\_and\\_risk\\_of\\_type\\_2\\_diabetes\\_three\\_large\\_prospective\\_U\\_S\\_cohort\\_studies\\_/22006727?file=39059312](https://diabetesjournals.figshare.com/articles/figure/Ultra-processed_food_consumption_and_risk_of_type_2_diabetes_three_large_prospective_U_S_cohort_studies_/22006727?file=39059312)

- Does research show any connections between a mental health diagnosis regarding UPFs and addiction?

The brain is wired to seek, and repeat, pleasurable activities and experiences. When the brain's reward circuitry is set off by something pleasurable, it triggers a surge of dopamine, a neurotransmitter that allows cells in the central nervous system to communicate with each other. People with mental health concerns including depression and anxiety may be more likely to consume UPFs as way to cope with emotional distress, and that could result in a greater vulnerability for UPF addiction.

- Women ages 50-64 are experiencing less estrogen. So is that making women more addicted to UPF?

The mechanism is unclear. However, though there is a decline in estrogen in midlife, women are also more likely to experience anxiety and depressive symptoms at this stage of life. People with mental health concerns including depression and anxiety may be more likely to consume UPFs as way to cope with emotional distress, and that could result in a greater vulnerability for UPF addiction. The brain is wired to seek, and repeat, pleasurable activities and experiences. When the brain's reward circuitry is set off by something pleasurable, it triggers a surge of dopamine, a neurotransmitter that allows cells in the central nervous system to communicate with each other.

- Should we be using iodized salt when cooking instead of sea salt?

Yes. Iodized salt is the most reliable way to get the iodine you need and cuts down on deficiency. Pregnant women need about 50% more iodine and there's evidence showing that many pregnant women in the U.S. under consume iodine. Dairy products, seafood, and eggs supply iodine, so if you're a vegan or you eat few of these foods, you may not get enough iodine.

- What kind of juice in the hot dog would be a nitrite?

Celery juice is high in nitrites, which is what preserves the meat. It's added to hot dogs instead of sodium nitrite, but it may be just as problematic for health.

- If celery has high amounts of nitrates that could be problematic for forming carcinogenic nitrosamines, is there any concern for beetroot, beetroot juice, and beetroot powder?

Beetroot contains nitrates, not nitrites. The body converts nitrates in nitric oxide, which can help manage blood pressure. Nitrites are found in sodium nitrite and celery juice used to preserve meat.

- What do you think about protein bars?

I think they are useful to fill in small protein gaps in the diet.

- People who live in food deserts and people who don't have refrigerators or stoves represent a very small portion of the US and are obviously not who the recommendations are targeted at. Your thoughts?

Everyone who lives in the U.S. is part of the audience for recommendations about food and nutrition.

- Can you explain who is behind Nova? Is it an organization? Is it U.S.-based or international?

In 2009, Carlos Monteiro, PhD, came up with the system with a team of researchers from the Center for Epidemiological Studies and Nutrition at the School of Public Health at the University of São Paulo, Brazil.

- Where is wine? In the same group 4 as the distilled alcohol?

No. Wine is in group 3, along with other fermented alcoholic beverages such as beer, and alcoholic cider.

- How much less healthy is UPF? It is unrealistic to tell someone never to eat these again. So I wonder how much is recommended paired with a healthy diet?

I don't think it's necessary to tell people to avoid all UPF, but some are clearly better than others. For example, orange cheese puffs are low-nutrient while enriched packaged whole wheat bread, also considered a UPF, is nutrient-rich. Overall eating patterns matter most, and there is room for low-nutrient processed foods, if people consume them sparingly and their diet is otherwise balanced in terms of nutrients and calories.

- If you were to define UPFs, how would you define them?

That's a tough one. I think Nova has a lot to offer but it needs to include a nutrition component and it needs more clarification in terms of additives. There is a lot to consider.

- Is canned tuna without added salt still a UPF?

Canned tuna *with* added salt is considered a processed food not an UPF. It's in Category 3. I'm guessing that canned tuna without added salt might be in Category 1.

- What is in Seltzer that causes it to be labeled ultra processed? I have patients drinking 6-8 cans per day!

To my knowledge, flavored seltzer is considered an UPF because it contains natural flavors, which may be extracted with solvents and by using industrial processes.

- Is celery salt as a seasoning in recipes safe?

Yes.

- White rice is not considered ultra-processed: here are links saying it is not: <https://ecuphysicians.ecu.edu/wp-content/pv-uploads/sites/78/2021/07/NOVA-Classification-Reference-Sheet.pdf> or <https://montanaafp.org/wp-content/uploads/NOVA-Classification-of-Foods.pdf> Can you please comment?

White rice may not be in the lists you are citing, but if it contains added vitamins and minerals that are produced through industrial processes, then technically speaking, it's UPF. Also, your question highlights the quirkiness and subjectivity of the Nova system. How is it possible for white rice, which *is* processed, to be listed in Category 1 as a minimally processed food along with brown rice? It makes no sense.

- Can you share ideas for inexpensive protein foods that are less processed?

Inexpensive is a relative term, but I think for the amount of protein and other nutrients they deliver, these foods are among the least expensive protein sources: dried and canned lentils, beans, and split peas, eggs, tofu, frozen edamame, yogurt, cottage cheese, milk, canned tuna, and salmon.

- Can you share your thoughts on preservatives with high amount of phosphates?

Phosphoric acid, dicalcium phosphate, sodium phosphate, and trisodium phosphate are some examples of inorganic phosphorus added to foods. People on low phosphorus diets may need to avoid foods with these additives, which include deli meats, bacon, sausage, soda and other soft drinks. Because these foods are relatively high in sodium, saturated fat, or added sugar, people without concerns about phosphorus should also limit their consumption.

- You mentioned something about the problem with UPF is what the diet is missing in terms of vitamins and minerals. Can UPF like chips, cookies, premade dinners, etc., be part of a healthy diet, assuming you are still eating the recommended fruits, veggies, whole grains, etc.?

Overall eating patterns matter most, and there is room for low-nutrient processed foods, if people consume them sparingly and their diet is otherwise balanced in terms of nutrients and calories.

- How do you respond when patients say processed foods are "junk"?

I point out that nearly every food they eat is processed and that many processed foods, such as canned beans, tuna, and whole wheat bread, offer lots of different nutrients that benefit health.

- How can we access the Nova System?

<https://archive.wphna.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/WN-2016-7-1-3-28-38-Monteiro-Cannon-Levy-et-al-NOVA.pdf>

- Do you think the new dietary guidelines and the rhetoric around “highly processed foods” will negatively impact communities that rely on UFPs for nutrition/their diet, like in food deserts?

It’s very possible. Rejecting all highly-processed foods out of hand is unwarranted and can put people with limited access to food in a precarious position by curbing their access to nutrients.

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