

Food and your brain: ‘Ultra-processed’ foods high in salt, sugar and fat are cheap and accessible — but increase risks of anxiety and depression

Although many ultra-processed foods—soda, candy, energy bars, fruit-flavored yogurt, frozen pizza, and frozen meals—can satisfy cravings for sweet, fatty, salty foods, emerging research suggests these items are particularly bad for the brain—with mood and cognition taking a hit.

Diets high in these foods were linked to a 44 percent greater risk of depression and a 48 percent higher risk of anxiety, according to a [meta-analysis published in the journal *Nutrients*](#). In one of these studies, risk rose from consuming just 33 percent of calories from ultra-processed food. A separate [study](#) from Brazil that tracked 10,775 people found that taking in just 20 percent of calories from these foods was linked to a 28 percent faster rate of cognitive decline compared with people who ate less processed food.

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Processed foods can be healthy, it's the *ultra*-processed items that are linked to poor health. What's the difference? Very generally, ultra-processed foods use ingredients not found in a home kitchen. A more precise description comes from the [NOVA](#) classification system.

By consuming ultra-processed food people neglect the “good stuff” like fruits, vegetables and simply-prepared whole grains.

“That means you’re shortchanged on nutrients that are good for the brain, including phytonutrients—beneficial substances in plants,” [researcher Melissa] Lane wrote. For example, there are about 8,000 varieties of polyphenols that have antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties; early studies indicate that diets low in these compounds are linked to depression.

[**This is an excerpt. Read the original post here**](#)