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Let’s get ‘real’ in 2024

With the arrival of 2024, we have yet another “beginning” to reimagine our lives, goals and dreams for the coming year. According to a recent study by Forbes, nearly 50 percent of Americans make New Year’s resolutions with the intent of improving their health. But as often happens with important, but not urgent, goals these efforts diminish over time.

One way to improve success is by focusing on small, specific, measurable objectives – like prioritizing good nutrition. Although we are inundated with information about trendy diets and approaches, the simplest way to improve your nutrition is to “get real” with your food.

What does that mean? It means choosing foods and drinks that are full of real, nutrient rich items that help our body grow, heal and thrive. Foods that are actually going to boost our health and wellness. It also means choosing fewer of ultra-processed foods. The definition of processed foods and ultra-processed foods (UPF) is often confusing, varied and unhelpful. However, let’s look at food in three categories. Unprocessed foods would be things like fresh fruit and vegetables, meat and eggs. They are minimally changed from their original form and have usually nothing added to them. Processed foods is a wide range of foods from bagged spinach to canned vegetables to bacon. Some have been minimally processed, like spinach being washed and bagged, while others have been processed more with the addition of sugar, salt and other additives. Ultra-processed foods have been processed quite a bit and often have a lot of additives like salt, sugar, colors and other preservatives.1

According to NOVA, UPF are foods with “additives whose purpose is to imitate sensorial qualities of unprocessed of minimally processed foods”. So, they are things added to the food item to imitate certain qualities. This could include “colorants, flavorings, nonsugar sweeteners, emulsifiers, humectants, sequestrants, and firming, bulking, de-foaming, anticaking, and glazing agents”.2 That is a lot of things that I’m not quite sure what exactly they mean or what they would do. Results from the Third National Health and Nutrition Examination Study revealed that those who were consuming the highest amounts of ultra-processed food intake had a 31% higher risk of all-cause mortality.3 Another study showed that those who had the highest intake of ultra-processed foods experienced increased risks of cardiovascular disease mortality.4 Of that group high sugar content explained 36.3% of the relation between ultra-processed foods and ischemic heart disease mortality.

For me an easy way to look at it is unprocessed foods are very much like their original form and have nothing added to them. Ultra-processed most likely don’t look much like the original form – like chips or cereals or frozen breakfast sandwiches etc. We just don’t see chips, cereal, and breakfast sandwiches growing so we know these items have been altered quite a bit. Now not all processed foods are bad. For instance bagged spinach can be very convenient. Fruit bars with just fruit can be a healthy alternative to other more processed items. It comes back to the idea of being a food detective and reading the nutrition facts panel and ingredient list. If there are things listed in the ingredient list that you don’t know exactly what they are, I encourage you to look them up and see what they are and what they do. You can simply do a search on the internet and find out instantly what the item is and what it is used for and possible side effects. I recently did this and found a lot of common additives may cause gastrointestinal upset such as gas, bloating and other issues. After looking up the ingredients then evaluate if these are things you may be feeling after eating the item then decide if that is something that is providing your body with all it needs to feel its best, to fight off disease, to help you do all you want to do in 2024. Looking at food as one of the most powerful things we can do daily to help our body can often help us feel motivated and encouraged to choose items that are full of real ingredients, lots of vitamins and minerals and packed with fiber, protein and antioxidants. Instead of getting overwhelmed with goals, try instead to focus on real food, real ingredients and foods that help you feel your best.

*Tera Moorehead is the Director of Community Outreach, Wellness and Philanthropy at Ridgecrest Regional Hospital. With dual master’s degrees in nutrition and education, as well as a national board certified health and wellness coach, Tera shares her passion for health and wellness through various programs offered free to the community through RRH. You can contact her at 760-499-3825.*

1. <https://newsnetwork.mayoclinic.org/discussion/mayo-clinic-minute-what-are-ultraprocessed-foods-2/>
2. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6389637/>
3. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30789115/>
4. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33333551/>