

Instead of calories and macros, think about the level of food processing, expert says

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Alexandra DiFeliceantonio, assistant professor with the Fralin Biomedical Research Institute at VTC and associate director of the research institute's Center for Health Behaviors Research. Credit: Virginia Tech

Scientific consensus is building around a clear recommendation: To improve health, we need to think differently about our diet of ultra-

processed foods. Rather than focus on calories or macronutrients, consider how the food you eat has been physically and chemically modified, says Alexandra DiFeliceantonio, an assistant professor and neuroscientist with the Fralin Biomedical Research Institute at VTC and associate director of the research institute's Center for Health Behaviors Research.

It's not as easy as it sounds. Processed foods have become a growing part of the American diet as manufacturers work to produce inexpensive, convenient foods with a long shelf life. "Given how prevalent these foods are—they make up 58% of calories consumed in the United States—there is so much we don't know," said DiFeliceantonio said.

"If you're trying to quit drinking, you don't go to the bar. But you can't stop eating," DiFeliceantonio says. Food advertising, vending machines, the checkout line at the [grocery store](#), and even the cookies in the breakroom make ultra-processed foods difficult to avoid. The challenge is in defining which foods have the most potential for addiction and why, and determining how we can best change the modern [food](#) environment.

How to identify ultra-processed foods

Scientists at the University of Sao Paulo in Brazil created the NOVA Food Classification system to help people group foods by their level of processing. Notably, ultra-processed foods lack fiber; include a significant amount of added sugar, salt and fat; and their nutrition labels include a long list of often unrecognizable ingredients.

Why this matters

When thinking about [food choices](#), people often focus on calories in, calories out; macronutrients; and the prevalence of obesity. But for

people of all sizes and activity levels, a diet high in ultra-processed foods has been associated with diabetes, cancer, and all-cause mortality.

"We're eating things that hurt us," DiFeliceantonio says.

Their effect on the brain

Ultra-processed foods share the addictive qualities of tobacco and other substances, says DiFeliceantonio. "Certain types of food affect people's brains in a way that may be similar to drugs of abuse. They have been engineered to be delicious." People can experience intense cravings, less control over intake, symptoms of withdrawal, and continued use despite negative consequences.

Provided by Virginia Tech

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