The Diet That Helps You Lose Twice as Much Weight, Without Counting Calories

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BY HEATHER HURLOCK

Which diet helps you lose weight without cutting carbs, counting calories, or tracking macros?

A landmark ***Nature Medicine*** trial from University College London (UCL) has turned diet advice on its head, finding that the key to weight loss isn't how much you eat, it's how processed your food is.

This study offers a clear, actionable takeaway: If you want better weight and health results, shifting toward minimally processed foods can work faster and more effectively than focusing on calories or macros alone.

What to Eat to Lose Weight: The Study That Changes Everything

This was the first long-duration, real-world crossover trial to compare minimally processed foods (MPFs) with ultra-processed foods (UPFs) under nutrition guidelines designed to be equally "healthy" on paper.

Over 8 weeks per diet, 55 adults followed each eating pattern, separated by a 4-week "washout" period. Both diets were matched to the **UK's *Eatwell Guide*** targets for calories, fat, carbs, protein, fiber, and salt. Both allowed people to eat as much or as little as they wanted (ad libitum feeding).

The only difference was the degree of processing: from whole oats, fresh roast chicken, and vegetables on the minimally processed foods plan to ready-made

lasagna, reformulated cereals, and packaged snacks on the ultra-processed foods plan.

How Minimally Processed Foods Beat Ultra-Processed

- **More weight loss**: 2.06% weight loss with minimally processed foods vs. 1.05% weight loss on ultra-processed foods over 8 weeks
- **Better body composition**: Those eating minimally processed foods lost fat mass without losing lean mass
- **Natural calorie drop**: Those eating minimally processed foods ate 290 fewer calories a day vs. 120 fewer calories a day for those eating ultra-processed foods, without intentional restriction
- **Craving control**: Those eating minimally processed foods showed twice the improvement in resisting overall cravings and four times the improvement for savory cravings

Study author **Dr. Samuel Dicken** explains: “Though a 2% reduction may not seem very big, that is only over eight weeks and without people trying to actively reduce their intake. Scaled up over a year, we’d expect 13% weight loss in men and 9% in women on the minimally processed diet, versus 4% and 5% on the ultra-processed diet.”

Watch Out for the “Health Halo” Effect

Some ultra-processed foods look healthy at first glance, protein bars, plant-based meats, high-fiber cereals, or “low-sugar” desserts, but they’re still engineered with additives, refined starches, and flavor enhancers that can disrupt hunger signals and encourage overeating.

Nutrition labels may look balanced, but these “halo ultra-processed foods” can behave

more like indulgent snacks than supportive fuel. The quickest test? Ask if you could make it at home with the same ingredients. If the answer's no, it's probably more processed than it appears.

The **American Heart Association's 2025 science advisory** makes it clear: processing affects health in ways nutrient labels can't capture.

Ultra-processed foods often:

- Disrupt hunger and fullness signals, encouraging overeating
- Contain additives (like emulsifiers) that can alter the gut microbiome
- Introduce packaging chemicals (like bisphenols and phthalates) that may affect hormones
- Deliver textures and flavors engineered for repeat eating, not satiety

Over time, high-ultra-processed foods diets have been linked in large-scale population studies to higher rates of heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, and certain cancers, even in people whose nutrient intake appears balanced on paper.

Senior author **Prof. Rachel Batterham** puts it simply: "Choosing less processed options such as whole foods and cooking from scratch, rather than ultra-processed, packaged foods or ready meals, is likely to offer additional benefits in terms of body weight, body composition, and overall health."

5 Ways to Apply This Research Now

1. **Build your meals from minimally processed foods**
   Make fruit, vegetables, legumes, nuts, seeds, whole grains, fresh meat or fish, and plain dairy your default. Here's how to stock your longevity pantry.
2. **Choose processed foods with intention**

Some processed foods, like canned beans, frozen vegetables, or plain yogurt, can be nutrient-rich and convenient. Pick these over high-sugar, high-additive packaged foods.

3. 3 **Keep minimally processed visible and ready**
   Wash and chop vegetables ahead of time, store ready-to-eat protein where you can see it, and keep fruit in plain sight.
4. 4 **Cook more than you think you have time for**
   Even a 10-minute three-ingredient meal from whole foods shifts your balance toward more health and well-being.
5. 5 **Watch for “health halo” foods**
   Protein bars, reformulated cereals, and “diet” frozen meals may meet nutrient guidelines but still deliver the metabolic effects of ultra-processed foods.

Why This Matters for Longevity

This study is about more than weight. For adults over 40, the combination of fat loss without muscle loss, reduced cravings, and better appetite regulation is powerful for preventing the metabolic decline that accelerates with age.

- **Muscle preservation** supports mobility, independence, and metabolic health.
- **Craving control** lowers the risk of rebound weight gain and diet fatigue.
- **Reduced calorie intake without restriction** makes it easier to maintain a healthy weight long-term.

And because high-ultra-processed-food diets are associated with chronic disease risk, making even a partial shift toward MPF could protect heart, brain, and metabolic health well into later decades.

The trial confirms something simple and profound: how your food is made matters as much as what’s in it. Even when calories, protein, carbs, fat, fiber, and salt are

matched, a diet higher in minimally processed foods delivers better results, fast.

The most practical move? Build your plate from whole or lightly processed ingredients most of the time, and use ultra-processed foods strategically, not as your foundation. In essence, it’s about choosing the foods that work with your body, not against it.

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WRITTEN BY:



Heather Hurlock