

Study: Highly processed food linked to obesity

By Emily Baumgaertner
Los Angeles Times

For four weeks, 20 healthy volunteers checked into a research center hospital and were served a variety of tempting meals: cinnamon French toast, stir-fry beef with broccoli and onions, turkey quesadillas and shrimp scampi.

Researchers scrutinized everything that was eaten and came away with the first hard evidence to support a long-held suspicion: Heavily processed foods could be a leading factor in America's obesity epidemic.

The unusual clinical trial compared the volunteers' calorie consumption and weight gain when they ate a diet based on unprocessed ingredients and when they ate meals dominated by ultraprocessed foods. Both daily menus had matching amounts of calories, fat, sugar, carbohydrates and salts, and diners said they were equally tasty and satisfying.

Yet, the volunteers chose to consume an average of 508 additional calories per day on the ultraprocessed diet. After two weeks, they weighed an average of 2 pounds more than their counterparts who had dined on unprocessed foods.

The findings, published Thursday in the journal *Cell Metabolism*, will force scientists to rethink the complicated relationship between dietary habits and health.

"I thought it was all about the nutrients," said study leader Kevin Hall, a section chief at the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, which is part of the National Institutes of Health.

"There's something other than the sugar and fat on the food label that causes people to overeat and gain weight," Hall said. "We don't fully

know the mechanism yet, but processed foods aren't just innocent bystanders."

The American diet has changed drastically over the past century. Homegrown produce and local poultry have given way to canned vegetables and deep-fried chicken tenders. Doctors have long suspected that changes in food preparation were among the key contributors to the obesity epidemic, but they've struggled to find ways to reverse the trend.

Almost 40% of adults in America are obese, more than double the percentage in 1980, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The obesity rate among children has almost tripled in the same time period.

Hall and his colleagues decided it was time to get serious with a randomized controlled trial, considered the gold standard for medical research. They recruited 20 people who weren't picky eaters and were willing to spend a month living at the NIH's Metabolic Clinical Research Unit in Bethesda, Maryland.

The volunteers were given three meals per day and were allowed to refill their plates as much as they wanted. They had access to unlimited snacks. They were randomly assigned to consume an ultraprocessed diet or an unprocessed one for the first two weeks of the experiment. Then, they switched menus for the remaining two weeks.

If volunteers ate everything put on their plates all day long, those on the unprocessed diet would have consumed the same number of calories and nutrients as those on the ultraprocessed diet. In reality, their consumption was different because the researchers served gargantuan amounts of food — an average of 5,400 calo-

ries each day — and participants left different amounts of food on their plates.

Participants said both diets were filling and delicious. That may sound trivial, but it's important for a nutrition study because it helps eliminate the influence of factors like food preference that could influence the experiment's results.

"I thought it would be a no-brainer that people simply liked the ultraprocessed foods better," Hall said. "My first hypothesis went right out the window."

Some of the foods in each diet were predictable: croissants and sausage for one morning's ultraprocessed breakfast, or salad with grilled chicken, bulgur and apples for an unprocessed

lunch.

But other meal assignments might surprise you.

For dinner one night, participants on the unprocessed diet got beef tender roast with barley and spinach, while their ultraprocessed counterparts consumed turkey and cheese sandwiches with baked chips, canned peaches and nonfat vanilla Greek yogurt.

For breakfast one morning, the unprocessed group was served omelets made from fresh eggs, while the other ate scrambled eggs prepared from Fresh Start liquid.

Snacks included raw nuts and fruit for the unprocessed diet, but dry roasted peanuts and applesauce for the other.

Researchers tracked how much and how fast each

person ate, and the contrast between their behavior on the unprocessed and the ultraprocessed diets was stark.

For instance, when volunteers were served ultraprocessed foods, they ate at an average rate of about 37 grams and nearly 50 calories per minute.

But when eating unprocessed foods, they averaged only about 30 grams and about 32 calories per minute.

Hall said the discrepancy could be due to differences in the foods' texture. Ultraprocessed foods are generally softer, and people tend to eat soft foods quickly. That means volunteers would have swallowed more food by the time their guts were able to register their fullness and send signals to the brain that

eating should stop.

Whatever the explanation, participants gained an average of 2 pounds over the two weeks they ate ultraprocessed foods.

Luckily for them, they lost an average of 2 pounds over the two weeks they were on the unprocessed diet.

Blood sugar levels and measures of liver health remained largely the same on both diets, probably because all participants were considered healthy adults at the study's onset, the researchers said.

Interestingly, the ultraprocessed diet appeared to trigger a higher expenditure of energy — but not enough to counteract the hundreds of additional calories consumed.



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BEARS

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They'll come in and nibble on it but if you throw out big chunks they'll grab a piece and run off in the brush to eat. You want them staying in front of you.

So there are better choices for bait than meat. Don't get me wrong, I'll keep hauling up some but I'll list out a few better choices. Small bait is better. By this I mean like popcorn, dog food, stuff that they have to scoop up by the handfuls so they can't grab a piece and run off and eat it in the brush, out of sight. And of course doughnuts are like crack cocaine to them!

It works to pour old used cooking grease over the top of your bait. They love that plus they track it off from your bait which leaves a scent trail in every which direction to draw in more bears. I also like to hang a scent bag so the thermals carry the scent up and down the mountains.

You'll want to use a barrel for multiple reasons. First off, it keeps a bear from gorging and then leaving. Cut an 8-inch (or thereabouts, I've never measured mine) hole about two-thirds of the way up the barrel for the bear to reach in and retrieve bait. Make a smooth cut so they don't cut up their arms.

Chain or strap the barrel to a tree. You'd be surprised how far a bear can roll, carry or whatever they do to steal your barrel. One time I had a 20-gallon barrel set up for my old bear hunting buddy, Roy Snetten. It disappeared. I finally found it out in the middle of a willow thicket. I don't have a clue how they got it out there. I could hardly get it out with it thrown over my shoulder.

Once the bears start hitting your bait, you'll want to keep it full. You don't want it to get empty and then them move on. You want them staying around your bait. When they start hitting it hard you'll find their beds nearby. Many times in steep country they'll lay on the uphill side of a big yellow pine. You'll find their beds there.

At first you'll want to have scent bags hanging but eventually hopefully with them tracking out grease you'll have drawn in all of the neighborhood bears. And if at first if all that you have showing up is sows, don't panic. That's the best bait that you could have.

The later in the season it gets, the more important having sows around is a big deal. They'll start going into heat the end of May on into June. I've had baits with nothing but sows and small bears and then suddenly the big daddy shows up out of the blue.

And one last thing. You'll want to get in the backcountry so hound hunters don't run bears off of your bait. That's frustrating to haul bait to a spot for 3 to 4 weeks then take vacation and go set on your bait only to discover that someone has been running your bait.

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