Trust the process?

We've heard that processed and ultraprocessed foods (foods changed from their natural state) can be bad for our health. High levels of trans fat, saturated fat, salt and sugar can be found in things like crackers, chips and soda. That can lead to heart disease, obesity, diabetes and other ailments.

But Rachel Bauman, a registered dietitian at OSF HealthCare, admits it's sometimes a matter of convenience. Processed foods can be cheaper, easier to cook, have a longer shelf life and have a lower risk of food-borne illness.

So, how can we learn to live with processed foods? Bauman says as you grocery shop, look for healthier options that you can eat in moderation.

- Bread: "If you go to the store and they have a bakery, that bread would be considered processed," Bauman says. It's not a bad option.

  "If you go to the bread aisle for things more commercially baked, that would be ultraprocessed," she adds. "With any ultraprocessed bread, I would look for whole grains and a high amount of fiber. That would be the healthiest choice that's good for heart health and still has shelf life."

- Meat: Freshly cut meat from the grocery deli is an option, but Bauman says the level of processing will vary by the store. Either way, lean toward chicken, turkey and seafood, she says. Steer clear of lots of hot dogs, sausage and dried meat like beef jerky. If you do want some red meat, try a lean cut like round or loin.

- Yogurt: Instead of a flavored yogurt with unhealthy sweeteners, opt for plain yogurt and add fresh fruit or honey.

- Beans: "Any bean that's dried and doesn't have additives would be healthy. Even with canned beans, you can find low sodium varieties," Bauman says. "You can drain and rinse the beans, and that will cut back the sodium too."

- Hummus: It's a good source of fiber and heart-healthy fats, Bauman says. Look for hummus made with olive oil, she adds.

- Oatmeal and cereal: They're ultraprocessed, Bauman says. But there are healthier kinds.

  "Buy varieties with less sugar and sodium. You're still getting that fiber from the whole grains," she says. "You can certainly continue to eat those foods."

Change is hard but worth it

This subject is something Bauman says she talks with patients about a lot. Old habits are hard to break, as the saying goes. So what's the advice to, say, swap out the chips for plain yogurt?

"Don't put too much pressure on yourself. We have to be realistic with our budget and schedule," Bauman says. "Take small steps. One or two changes a week. Slowly improve the diet. Don't expect a full change overnight."

It's also never a bad idea to talk to your primary care provider or dietitian about changing what you eat. And the OSF HealthCare website has plenty of healthy recipes.