Process This

OSF HealthCare Newsroom
Shelli Dankoff – Media Relations Program Manager

You're in a hurry. What could be easier than grabbing a quick, pre-made deli sandwich from your favorite grocer for lunch or dinner? The convenience is great – but have you thought about the nutritional value of that sandwich laden with processed foods?

A new study out of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) found that eating more ultra-processed foods instead of minimally processed ones can lead to packing on a few extra pounds.

Ultra-processed foods tend to have higher amounts of things like salt and sugar – it helps preserve them and give them a longer shelf-life.

"Usually the more ingredients, the more processed it can be, and the more things that can hide in there. So where we can go wrong with processed foods is they often contain a lot of salt, sugar, and unhealthy fats. So we do want to be careful if we are choosing more of those higher processed foods we are reading the labels to get ones that are less in those three things," said Kaela Ketchum, licensed clinical dietitian, OSF HealthCare

According to the NIH study, weight gain from ultra-processed foods is not solely due to the salt, calories, or extra fat in those foods. Researchers determined weight gain depended on who ate more fat and carbohydrates, but also on how quickly they ate. Blood tests determined those who ate minimally processed foods had less of a hormone called ghrelin, which stimulates your appetite.

As a dietitian, Kaela Ketchum says processed foods are everywhere and hard to avoid, and not all processed foods are created equal. Home-grown or items with a single ingredient are best, but some minimally processed foods, like pre-cut apples you can buy in the store, aren't all bad. That's why it's important to read labels for added ingredients.

"There's some that we call minimally processed and these would be things that are ready to go like bagged lettuce, roasted nuts or even precut vegetables are minimally processed foods but then we have like the higher processed foods which would be like our frozen dinners, snack crackers and deli meats," Ketchum explained.

"Two tips I'd recommend adding your own fruits to things. So one could be instead of buying the yogurt with the fruit on the bottom just buy a vanilla yogurt add your own fruit or with oatmeal, too, instead of buying the fruit already added just get regular oatmeal and add your own fruit. That's a way to make it a little bit less processed. Another thing is making your own salad dressing, doing like vinaigrette instead of buying it because those have a long shelf life so they know there's some ingredients like salt and sugar that have been used to preserve it."

Ketchum also shares a word of caution when it comes to studies. She noted that even though the NIH is a well-respected group, the study size was small and controlled, meaning the participants were provided with all the food they consumed for a month. That isn't realistic for the majority of people. So Ketchum says make sure you have a critical eye on whatever study you read when it comes to your health.

"We want to make sure that it's has a large amount of people or if not there's a lot of studies after that say the same thing. One study may get one result they may do another study similarly and get another result. So before we make a sound conclusion we want to make sure there's a lot of good studies out there and that they aren't biased either."

If you're looking for some healthy ways to shake up your mealtime, check out these recipes.