



# Feeling ill? Check your diet!

By [Eve Lees](#) May 2016

## Let food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food – *Hippocrates*

*Hippocrates* was right. Food is powerful stuff. It can make you healthy and it can make you sick. Looking closely at our diet – and altering it – is not something most of us commonly do when we become ill. *But it should be the first thing we consider!*

Whether your illness is a mild one, or as serious as cancer, consider scheduling an appointment with a nutrition specialist, as well as with your medical specialist. Nutrition is the foundation for your healthy body. It forms your structure and maintains all your vital functions. *Everything* is supported by this strong foundation: your ability to think, to move, even your general mood and disposition relies upon its support. If this foundation is weak, your good health won't be supported. Disease and disorder is your body's way of telling you something is wrong; there are cracks in your foundation. So take a close look at your diet.

Even if you are currently disease-free, cleaning up your diet is a wise investment for your future health.

Our bodies were designed to eat a whole food and process and refine it via the digestive system. We are like a factory on two legs. But we are not designed to digest food that's been highly processed and refined *before* we eat it. Ultra-processed, refined foods are no different than eating any kind of refined 'sugar.' Table sugar (sucrose) is just another ultra-processed food, extracted from a whole food source (sugar beets, sugar cane, or corn). It is rapidly absorbed, as is any whole food that has been highly broken down: flour, fruit juices, syrup, to name a few. These foods and those made with them are digested just as quickly as the table sugar that comes from sugar cane. The resultant surge of insulin with its effects on blood sugar levels will generate a chain-reaction of multiple problems. These problems are far too numerous to go into detail in this article, but some of them will be mentioned.

We need to *more often* eat foods as they naturally occurred in nature – or as close to that as possible. Many of our foods today do not resemble their original form. These highly changed foods lack many nutrients both known and unknown. The nutrients and other properties are the "code" to instruct the body what to do with the food – how much insulin or digestive acids to secrete, etc. It's not unlike the "html code" we must program into a computer for the computer to be able to interpret and then relay information to others. In much the same way, our food supplies a "code" that the body reads. Take even just one element in the food away and you have a code that may be difficult to read. Confusion will occur.

The digestive system is an amazing, highly synchronized, methodical structure. It is designed to work in unison with all the elements that occur in the plants and animals we eat. Highly changed foods lack many nutrients that worked together in the whole food, as a "team" to assist the body in reading the digestion instructions for that particular food. We know enough to know that when one nutrient is extracted from a food it can potentially become more potent and more toxic to our bodies than when it was in combination with the other nutrients that occurred in the food. For example, we can risk overdosing on Vitamin A or



iron *supplements*, yet if large amounts are ingested from a food source, they do not create a problem. It's suspected other nutrients in the whole food help to buffer its potency.

The same problems can occur in highly changed foods. Vitamins are lost or isolated. Those remaining may become unbalanced; becoming more potent (or less potent).

When the 'code' is disrupted in a highly changed food, the message may be misread. Our bodies become distressed. That's not a big problem if we *seldom* eat highly processed foods, because our bodies are very resilient and can

bounce back to good health, given time. However many of us chow down on those convenient, refined foods for every meal and snack. We choose to grab a snack bar instead of an apple. Eating this way all day long, for every meal, allows no time for the body to bounce back. The stress created in the digestive system can become chronic . . .

The body fights to retain homeostasis: hormones are being released at the wrong times and in the wrong amounts (i.e. insulin) and other defense mechanisms kick in, including secretion of the fight or flight stress hormone, cortisol. Cortisol has a necessary purpose, but it is *not* meant to circulate *continually* in our bodies. Cortisol signals the heart rate to increase, blood vessels to constrict, and therefore the blood pressure rises. All this is our ancient reaction to fear (stress), preparing us to run or fight. But with cortisol being present on a regular basis, the continual pressure in blood vessels will damage their walls and create inflammation. When inflammation is present, cholesterol is released into the bloodstream, because it is needed to repair the damage and build new cells. And then we shoot the messenger (cholesterol) by trying to rid it with cholesterol-lowering drugs. This just isn't getting to the root of the problem.

All this goes on while you innocently chew your cookies, sports bar, or gulp down soda pop. But you don't feel much more than perhaps a resulting burp from the carbonation in the soda. You have absolutely no idea of the chaos going on inside your body. This chronic systemic inflammatory response, from the damage being done, builds and builds, until your overworked liver, adrenals, pancreas and other organs become overwhelmed. Your health starts to fail. Much of the reason why it took so long for nutrition science to become a respected science (and it is still generally misunderstood) is because there is no observable "cause and effect." Your failing body may develop a serious illness in the future, but you would never attribute it to your long-time poor dietary habits. Because it took so long for you to become ill, you fail to see the 'dietary' cause and effect.

Highly processed foods require much energy to digest, because of the greater degree of difficulty for the body to digest them. We waste much energy digesting these foods – energy that would be better spent on other things, like physical activity! The first thing people notice when they cut the junk out of their diet is an abundance of energy, so it's no wonder being tired is such a common complaint in today's fast-food culture. In contrast, whole, natural foods take little energy to digest, because the body is familiar and comfortable digesting them. It's nature's design. As a result, you feel more alert and energetic.

## **Humans trying to perfect nature. Impossible.**

We were designed to digest *whole* foods – foods that nature intended humans to subsist on. Animals in the wild do not change their food supply. They intuitively know nature supplies them with the suitable foods they need to survive. And they survive quite well, unless humans interfere. Animals become very ill if they eat foods that are similar to the ultra-processed versions we eat.

We humans, however, think we can improve our food supply. Yet how can we change or improve something we do not fully understand? We have discovered many nutrients and other properties in our foods, but there are many we don't know of yet. And there is still much we do not understand about how these nutrients work within our bodies. We need to trust nature and trust that it is supplying us with all we need to keep our bodies operating efficiently.

## **We are either in denial, addicted or misinformed**

Through common sense, many of us accept that highly changed foods are not conducive to good health. Yet we continue to eat them. And we do that for three main reasons:

1. We are in denial. We do *not* want to stop eating those delicious foods with their intense, artificial flavours. Life just wouldn't be joyful without cake!
2. We are addicted to them and can't stop eating them, even if we *want* to stop. Highly changed foods elicit all the same changes in brain chemistry and the reward pathways that drugs and alcohol can stimulate. And lastly . . .
3. We don't stop eating highly processed/refined foods because many of us really don't know what they are. We've been confused, misinformed and overwhelmed by conflicting information.

Even many credible sources like well-known and respected nutrition newsletters, will send mixed, confusing messages to the public. They will tell you to stop or cut back eating highly processed foods. And then they explain how to choose 'healthy' bread. However, bread is a highly processed/refined food. It's made of flour, which is a highly processed food. And it often contains sugar, also highly processed. It is rarely clarified or suggested that whole grain kernels, *before* they are ground into flour, are what we should be eating more than bread. This distinction is seldom made even by credible sources. We are confused about flour vs. whole grains. Flour is *not* 'whole.' Bread is *not* a health food: It's one of the first highly refined foods humans created. Bread shouldn't be the major focus in our diets that it currently is. We're a 'sandwich' culture, but flour is in many foods we eat, not just in bread. It's eating lots of *flour* – *not* specifically wheat or gluten – that can make us sick.



More often, try eating your grains *whole*, instead of as *flour* in breads, pastas and other baked items. Cook it the same as you would rice: two parts water to one part grain. Bring both grain and water to boil on the stove, then immediately lower the temperature to simmer, until all the water is absorbed. There are many grains and grasses to experiment with: brown and wild rice, quinoa, buckwheat, amaranth, sorghum, millet, teff, and the whole grains of rye, wheat, oats, barley, kamut, spelt, to name a few.

Another commonly misunderstood food is stevia. Even very credible health "experts" advise us to use this sweetener instead of sugar. They claim it is *natural* and from a *natural source*: the stevia bush. Well then, table sugar is natural too, since it also came from natural sources (sugar cane, beets, or corn). What no one seems to *get* is that it is the *processing* and *refining* of these foods that are not health promoting. Stevia is just as processed and refined as table sugar. Stevia is not in a whole form and can confuse the digestive system as it tries to decipher what to do with it.

We don't need to completely avoid these highly processed foods. We just need to recognize what and which they are, to avoid over using them and risking our good health.

## **What exactly is an ultra-processed, refined food?**

Many foods today are processed in some way: Simple processing includes foods that are cut or cooked; more complicated processing is homogenizing, pasteurizing, fermenting or fortifying. Processing can minimize spoilage and therefore food-borne illness. But processing can go too far: Ultra-processed foods (or highly processed and refined foods) lose many of their nutrients and most often no longer resembles its original food form. For example, table sugar no longer resembles a sugar beet. Usually, they have ingredient labels (fresh apples or carrots do not have food labels). The ultra-processed foods most ubiquitous in our diet are sugar and flour. Flour is widespread in our diets: It is in most baked, packaged and prepared foods and in addition, we eat bread or buns with almost every meal. Very few people eat flour *before* it was flour, at least, not since our pioneer days when the whole kernels were cooked in a pot.

The highly changed 'flour' is not a language the body easily understands. Many nutrients were oxidized (exposed to oxygen, light, and heat) when the kernel was milled into flour. And it makes no difference if the flour is white or whole wheat. It's still highly processed, still extremely changed. And logically, when you think of it, there is no such thing as "whole wheat bread." As soon as you crush the kernel of grain to make flour, it's no longer "whole."

Whole grain kernels cooked on the stove offer far more nutrients than those lost when the kernel was smashed into flour. And those nutrients stay in natural synchronicity within the kernel, working together efficiently, prompting instructions and messages as they travel through our digestive system. They are not released from their hard external shell until we chew them, releasing all those vital nutrients into our bodies – and *not* into the air, which is what happens when they are ground into flour.

Refined sugar is also common in our diets and, like flour, is in practically every human-made food. Refined sugar is usually derived from sugar beets, sugar cane, or from corn (white, brown, yellow or turbinado sugar: they are all the same thing – all just various degrees of processing). And there are many other types of sugars derived from other whole food sources, like fructose from fruit, agave nectar (or syrup) from a cactus and stevia from the stevia plant. These are all highly changed foods that contribute to dietary distress. It really would be best to eat the sugar beets, sugar cane, corn, fruit, stevia leaves, etc. in their whole form instead of the ultra-processed version derived from them.



## **Start with small changes to improve your diet**

To change from an ultra-processed/refined diet (our typical Westernized way of eating) is a drastic and daunting step for many. We grew up eating this way! But there is no need to become fanatical. Making small changes, a few at a time, will aid in developing new habits and ensure their permanency.

First, try to omit or drastically reduce the amount of refined sugar and flour in your diet, including the products that contain them (and this automatically reduces the sodium, trans-fats, and other unhealthy ingredients which are in most prepared products!). By doing just this, you will reap noticeable improvements in your health.

Second, keep your meals as simple as possible. Meals do not have to be fancy or gourmet to taste good and look appealing. In fact, if you keep meals simple, you avoid leaning toward making them too processed. Most gourmet meals involve marinades, sauces, dressings and dips that contain sugar, flour, fats, salt, and perhaps trans-fats and artificial preservatives (if they are commercially prepared).

Choose from a wide variety (lots!) of vegetables raw or lightly cooked, fresh fruit, root vegetables, legumes, and natural seeds and nuts (*not* salted or candied). If you choose to eat meats, fish, eggs and dairy products, choose those produced without antibiotics or hormones. They should be as natural and less tampered with as possible: think roasted chicken breast *not* deli meats or wieners; and hard, unprocessed cheese instead of cheese spreads.

Our cultural food beliefs and perhaps our addiction to food makes us highly resistant to changing our diets. So, unfortunately, it becomes a very difficult thing to do. But when you become accustomed to the natural taste of foods – when your taste buds are no longer altered by intense artificial flavours – and when your body is properly nourished with the nutrients that naturally occur in whole foods, you will lose the addiction. You will not feel deprived that you are no longer drinking soda pop and eating cookies. Feeling deprived can be a symptom of addiction (so stay curious about that).



Instead, you will feel empowered.  
And so *damn* good.

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