RAINIER OLYMPIC NURSES ASSOCIATION

What's Really on the Menu?

Research References
& Practical Resources

Exploring the Science of Ultra-Processed Food

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Audience: Registered nurses, licensed practical nurses, and nursing students
Presentation: November 7, 2026

Presentation and recording resources:
RONA — What's Really on the Menu?

Prepared November 1, 2026 • Resource links and app features may change over time.

How to use this guide

This companion handout groups the scientific literature and credible public resources behind the presentation. Start with the primary research and government guidance, then use the practical links for label reading, meal planning, and informed food choices. Click any teal link to open its source.

Important distinction: The NOVA system categorizes foods by the nature, extent, and purpose of processing; it is not a direct score of nutritional quality. Observational studies can identify associations but do not, by themselves, prove that ultra-processed foods cause a given disease.

1 | Understanding ultra-processed foods and NOVA

Monteiro CA, Cannon G, Levy RB, et al. (2019). Ultra-processed foods: what they are and how to identify them. Public Health Nutrition, 22(5), 936–941. — Foundational explanation of the four NOVA groups.
https://doi.org/10.1017/S1368980018003762

Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health (2025). What Are Ultra-Processed Foods? — Accessible overview with classification context.
https://publichealth.jhu.edu/2025/what-are-ultra-processed-foods

Stanford Medicine (2025). Ultra-processed food: five things to know. — Clinical context and important nuances.
https://med.stanford.edu/news/insights/2025/07/ultra-processed-food--five-things-to-know.html

2 | U.S. consumption and health outcomes

CDC National Center for Health Statistics (2025). Data Brief No. 536: Ultra-processed food consumption in the United States. — National intake estimates; check age group and survey period when quoting figures.
https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db536.htm

Lane MM, et al. (2024). Ultra-processed food exposure and adverse health outcomes: umbrella review of epidemiological meta-analyses. BMJ, 384, e077310. — Synthesis of associations across health outcomes; largely observational evidence.
https://www.bmj.com/content/384/bmj-2023-077310

Hall KD, et al. (2019). Ultra-processed diets cause excess calorie intake and weight gain: an inpatient randomized controlled trial. Cell Metabolism, 30, 67–77.e3. — Small controlled-feeding study; participants ate roughly 500 more kcal/day on the tested ultra-processed diet.
https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31105044/

Chassaing B, et al. (2022). Randomized controlled-feeding study of dietary emulsifier carboxymethylcellulose. Gastroenterology, 162, 743–756. — Mechanistic human study; not proof that all emulsifiers have the same effects.
https://doi.org/10.1053/j.gastro.2021.11.006

3 | Food ingredients, additives, and risk interpretation

A substance's presence on an ingredient list does not establish harm. Assess dose, exposure, population, overall diet, and the quality of evidence. Hazard classifications and real-world risk are different concepts.

U.S. FDA. Types of Food Ingredients. — General food ingredient and additive framework.
https://www.fda.gov/food/food-additives-and-gras-ingredients-information-consumers/types-food-ingredients

U.S. FDA. High-Fructose Corn Syrup: Questions and Answers. — Background on HFCS.
https://www.fda.gov/food/food-additives-petitions/high-fructose-corn-syrup-questions-and-answers

U.S. FDA. Questions and Answers on Monosodium Glutamate (MSG). — Safety and labeling information.
https://www.fda.gov/food/food-additives-petitions/questions-and-answers-monosodium-glutamate-msg

WHO / IARC. Cancer: Carcinogenicity of the Consumption of Red Meat and Processed Meat. — Interpretation of evidence on processed meat; not a claim about every preservative.
https://www.who.int/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/cancer-carcinogenicity-of-the-consumption-of-red-meat-and-processed-meat

WHO (2023). Aspartame hazard and risk assessment results released. — Distinguishes IARC hazard identification from JECFA intake risk assessment.
https://www.who.int/news/item/14-07-2023-aspartame-hazard-and-risk-assessment-results-released

U.S. FDA. Questions and Answers on the Occurrence of Benzene in Soft Drinks and Other Beverages. — Context for sodium benzoate and specific beverage conditions.
https://www.fda.gov/food/environmental-contaminants-food/questions-and-answers-occurrence-benzene-soft-drinks-and-other-beverages

U.S. FDA. List of Select Chemicals in the Food Supply Under FDA Review. — Regulatory reviews and current status; revisit as guidance evolves.
https://www.fda.gov/food/food-chemical-safety/list-select-chemicals-food-supply-under-fda-review

4 | Food fraud and economically motivated adulteration

Food fraud is different from ultra-processing: it involves deliberate misrepresentation, substitution, dilution, or adulteration for economic gain. Some instances create safety risks; others primarily involve authenticity or value.

U.S. FDA. Economically Motivated Adulteration (Food Fraud). — Definitions, examples, and FDA approach.
https://www.fda.gov/food/compliance-enforcement-food/economically-motivated-adulteration-food-fraud

U.S. FDA (April 8, 2024). FDA Releases Report on Economically Motivated Adulteration in Honey. — Targeted sampling; findings must not be generalized to all honey sold in the U.S.
https://www.fda.gov/food/hfp-constituent-updates/fda-releases-report-economically-motivated-adulteration-honey

U.S. FDA. Import Alert 99-47: Human Food Products That Appear to Be Adulterated for Economic Gain. — Examples of enforcement and import screening.
https://www.accessdata.fda.gov/CMS_IA/importalert_1178.html

5 | Practical tools: food labels and everyday choices

U.S. FDA. How to Understand and Use the Nutrition Facts Label. — Slide 36 QR destination; serving sizes, added sugars, sodium, fiber, and other key fields.
https://www.fda.gov/food/nutrition-facts-label/how-understand-and-use-nutrition-facts-label

U.S. FDA. Daily Value on the Nutrition and Supplement Facts Labels. — 5% DV or less is generally low; 20% DV or more is generally high.

https://www.fda.gov/food/nutrition-facts-label/daily-value-nutrition-and-supplement-facts-labels

USDA Food and Nutrition Service. Attracting SNAP Customers to Your Farmers Market. — Local food access and SNAP information. Availability varies by market.
https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/farmer-producer/attracting-customers

Small steps to try this week

- Read one packaged food label: compare serving size, added sugars, sodium, and fiber.
- Plan two easy meals before shopping; build a short, flexible grocery list.
- Batch-prep one staple, such as beans, whole grains, washed vegetables, or a protein.
- Use practical shortcuts: frozen vegetables and canned beans can be nutritious and affordable.
- Visit a farmers market or local producer when feasible; local does not automatically mean safer or more nutritious.
- Make one sustainable change rather than attempting to eliminate every processed food.

6 | Optional digital tools

Yuka. How Food Products Are Rated. — Consumer-facing rating methodology; proprietary scores are not clinical diagnoses.
https://help.yuka.io/l/en/article/ijzgfvi1jq

Yuka. What Are Yuka's Limitations? — Read alongside the rating explanation.
https://help.yuka.io/l/en/article/wz3cbbztf3-what-are-yuka-s-limitations

Fig Food Scanner. Official App Overview. — Designed to help identify ingredients based on user-selected dietary needs; confirm accuracy independently for medical allergies.
https://foodisgood.com/app/

App functionality, access tiers, and subscription fees may change. For severe allergies or medically necessary restrictions, always confirm the actual package label and consult appropriate clinical guidance.

Continue learning and share the recording

The RONA event page is the intended year-long home for the recording and this participant resource. Visit the RONA presentation resource page.

Educational use and interpretation

This handout is intended for professional education, not individualized medical advice. Research evolves; source publication dates and links are provided to support independent review. Brand and app mentions are examples, not endorsements by RONA. The guide is a curated reference list rather than a systematic review of all available evidence.