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Season 3, Episode 4

Beyond Ultra-Processed: How Food Changes Your Body

Intro Voiceover: Welcome to Healthier You by Vanderbilt Health and Wellness, a podcast to help Vanderbilt faculty and staff live their healthiest lives.

Noelle McIntyre: Welcome back to the Healthier You podcast. My name is Noelle McIntyre. I'm the certified health education specialist with Health Plus, and I'm here to speak with Fran Blackman. She is one of our clinical dietitians with the nutrition clinic here on campus. We're going to speak a little bit about what this idea of ultra processed foods are, and how what we eat can change our bodies from the inside out. So, welcome. Fran when we think about food and how it changes our body, what does that really mean in practical terms?

Fran Blackman: So in practical terms, when we talk about how foods can change our body, it would mean that foods affect our cellular structure. Foods also affect energy levels. Foods affect the bacteria changes or cause bacteria changes, and also affect hormonal regulation. Of course, all this can potentially mean that this affects how a person feels and functions every day.

NM: Sometimes, we hear that buzzword of inflammation and maybe gut health. Can you give us some information about that?

Fran: So when we look at highly processed foods and how they can affect the blood sugar and inflammation and gut health, for example, there's inflammation in the body. There's an increase in what's called free radicals, which free radicals are basically just like unstable molecules that can lead to what's called oxidative stress on the body. When we talk about like oxidative stress on the body, that's actually linked to, for example, diabetes, or cancer, or high blood pressure, or high cholesterol.

And, also it can accelerate the aging process. So those highly processed foods we want to keep in moderation because of the fact that they can affect those areas and cause that inflammation in the cells. Then when we look at gut health, if the foods are highly processed, they can damage the gut bacteria. Whereas if the foods are more healthier choices, they can increase the healthy gut bacteria.

NM: I'm curious because we've been talking about processed foods, but we haven't really named what processed foods are. When I think about processed foods, I think about everything from convenience foods that I might stop at a gas station or a grocery store, or a fast food restaurant and pick up, to the vending machine at work. Do they all impact the body the same? Are there some that have a higher impact on gut health and inflammation and blood sugar? Can you kind of give us an idea about that?

Fran: So these would be foods that would have more artificial items in it, or oils that are more processed. So if I compare an example of a product, they may have olive oil that is more natural compared to something like a soybean oil that's much more processed or cottonseed oil that's much more processed, which is what it's like in chips a lot of times. And then, you know, fast food as well is much more processed. The protein is usually not lean. It's a more processed protein, a higher fat protein. I kind of think of it too, as the ingredient list. The longer the ingredient list, then it definitely has more processed items.

I was using an example the other day, like a natural peanut butter has two ingredients. Usually it's peanuts and salt, whereas if I pick up the traditional ones, the ingredient list is going to be longer. Another example I give sometimes would be natural sour cream, and then there's also what's called just original sour cream. So interestingly natural sour cream has like two ingredients. It's like cream and salt, pretty much, and enzymes. So, three ingredients. Then when you look at something that's more processed like an original sour cream, it actually has a much longer list of ingredients. Just, you know, to be aware of the ingredient list,

NM: If you grab something from a vending machine and you read through the ingredient list or the label on the back, you will see that the ingredients included are very long, which means that the item may have more calories and less whole foods put into it, correct?

Fran: Yes. So definitely, that long list will be an indication a lot of times that there's more additives that are being added in there.

NM: I'm kind of curious, can you tell us just a little bit more about how processed versus whole foods either feed or harm the gut bacteria?

Fran: So when we look at the gut microbiome, it has a very important function. It helps to regulate digestion, helps to support the immune system and also produces certain

nutrients. When we look at things like whole foods, whole foods definitely help to nourish that gut bacteria by providing essential fiber and nutrients. And then when we look at the example of the process foods - you know the things we were talking about earlier like the fast food and soda and like chips and, pastries, those type of things - they can harm the gut by cutting off the good microbiomes. And so we want to look at balancing them with the healthier foods.

NM: How does it influence our energy levels and mood and things like mental clarity?

FB: Well, certainly it's important to make sure that throughout the day that we're balancing or I use the term pairing foods. So, if you're looking at like, let's say I just had coffee and it was coffee but was highly sweetened with, you know, sugar or the flavorings, then that's not going to also give my body protein or certain vitamins and minerals. It's going to just give that sugar. So, it's going to spike, you know, maybe for a little while, but then also have that crash effect. So, the pairing becomes very important. So, if I'm having something like some coffee maybe pairing that with a protein bar or some nuts. Sometimes people do a combination of a small fruit with some nuts and then also can do that coffee, you know, having something to balance it. Definitely, that pairing becomes very important because also you're getting, again, those nutrients from each different food group. So, making sure that that pairing is a part of the plan throughout the day. If I pick up a fruit, and you're going to go a long period before the next meal, pairing it with some protein, like a string cheese or some nuts, or some peanut butter or something like that. That's very important.

NM: I like those tips. I like that idea of recognizing that there needs to be balance in what we're having, and that even if we're choosing something that's highly processed, there's still a way maybe to make it a little bit healthier and to help it span so it keeps the blood sugar steady and the energy and the focus level there. Thank you for that. If somebody wanted to reduce their ultra processed foods that they take in during a specific day or week, what are some really impactful changes that they can make?

FB: It helps to probably start with beverages. Sometimes beverages are a big area where ultra-processed ingredients come into play, especially like sodas and even like certain juices. So, definitely start with beverages and looking at that area. You were talking about the coffees earlier, reducing the amount of sugar in there. Another example, when eating out, tea is a big thing, sweet tea. I tell clients sometimes even the suggestion of like half sweet mixed with half unsweetened, you know, that type of thing. That is still a change where you're getting a little sweetness, but you know, it's not as much sugar. Instead of the soda, doing water that's infused with lime or lemon, versus again the soda, or like infused with like fruits and veggies.

When we look at other examples, you know, certainly snacks or just quick things that we can get out of a vending machine or get from convenience stores, but planning ahead and purchasing some things that can be kept in the office that are healthier choices, like a protein bar because they have good fiber. And, then they also have the protein balance and they're not heavy on ingredients and low sugar. Having those things on hand or having the little nut packs on hand, you know, those things you can put in the car.

I was telling a client earlier who has pizza maybe once a week, and so we were talking about is it possible to take that pizza and maybe have some carrot sticks with that, or have a little small salad on the side or fruit with it to kind of balance, again, that ultra processed food with something that would be more nutrient dense.

NM: One other thing that I think about, there's a lot of information on nutrition out these days. One of the great things about being technologically advanced is we have things like TikTok and Instagram and WebMD, and, you know, there's a wide variety that we all tap into. How do people avoid feeling overwhelmed by nutrition advice? How can you look at like a social influencer and know whether that is sound nutritional advice, or is there a way to tell?

FB: I think is very important to look up the information. Check that it's evidence based. You know, definitely checking the resource. When I listen to, sometimes, the web influencers, I definitely try to think about individualizing things. So, everything that they may be doing is not necessarily for me. You know, I think it's important to individualize things and not be hard on ourselves. Also, it helps, if it is nutrition related, to even consult with a dietitian.

NM: If there was one message that you want our listeners to remember about how food impacts their body, especially around ultra processed foods, what might that message be?

FB: That small changes go a long way over time and realize it's a daily task, but it's a worthy task, and striving to balance those ultra processed foods with the nutrient dense foods.

NM: Make those better choices each time. Well, thank you so much for joining us and sharing your insight. We really appreciate it. And thank you for listening and we hope to see you next time.

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