

# Food Labels Made Simple

## A Quick Guide to Spotting Ultra-Processed Foods (UPFs)

### WHY IT MATTERS

Ultra-processed foods (UPFs) are products made with ingredients you'd never usually find in a home kitchen — things like emulsifiers, stabilisers, colourings, sweeteners, and modified starches.



While these chemicals help make food cheap, tasty, and long-lasting, they can also affect our brains, hormones, and mood in ways we're only beginning to understand.

Learning to read food labels is the first step towards awareness — not to ban foods, but to make more mindful choices.

### Step 1

#### Check the first 3 ingredients


The first ingredients listed make up most of what you're eating.

- If they're whole foods (e.g., oats, milk, nuts, fruit) → 
- If they're sugars, refined flours, or oils →  a sign it may be ultra-processed.

### Step 2

Look out for ingredients you wouldn't cook with at home. Common signs of UPFs include:

- ✗ Emulsifiers (e.g., polysorbates, carrageenan)
- ✗ Stabilisers & thickeners (e.g., guar gum, xanthan gum)
- ✗ Artificial sweeteners (e.g., aspartame, sucralose)
- ✗ Colourings & flavour enhancers
- ✗ Modified starches



If you can't picture it in your own kitchen, it's likely a UPF!

### Step 3

#### Beware of Health Claims

Ironically, foods with bold health claims on the front are often the most processed.

Phrases like “low fat,” “high protein,” or “fortified with vitamins” can disguise the fact that the product is highly engineered.

# Task

Pick 3 items from your cupboard right now and:

1. Read the first 3 ingredients.
2. Circle any “red flag” ingredients.
3. Rewrite the list in plain English.
4. (Example: “Polysorbate 80, modified starch, colour E150” → “Additives, thickeners, artificial colouring”).

Food item:

Red flag ingredients

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‘Plain English’

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Food item:

Red flag ingredients

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‘Plain English’

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Food item:

Red flag ingredients

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‘Plain English’

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How does it feel to see the ingredients this way? Does it change how you think about the food?

**REMEMBER:** THIS ISN'T ABOUT PERFECTION OR RESTRICTION. IT'S ABOUT AWARENESS. THE MORE CONNECTED WE FEEL TO WHAT WE EAT, THE MORE EMPOWERED WE ARE TO MAKE CHOICES THAT NOURISH BOTH BODY AND MIND.