

Balancing healthy eating and processed foods for kids

Not All processed foods are harmful, but some are linked to obesity and heart disease

By Elizabeth M. Ward, MS, RDN and Kathleen Zelman, RDN

Kathleen: [00:00:00] Welcome to the Nutrition for Kids podcast. I'm your host, Kathleen Salman. Today we're tackling a tough issue for parents and kids, clean eating and processed foods. The dangers of processed foods have been in the headlines, particularly ultra processed foods and research, is linking highly processed foods to obesity and heart disease and other chronic conditions.

The sad statistic is that it's estimated that we consume 50 to 60% of our calories from these ultra processed foods. And as parents, we're trying to set this standard. We're trying to help kids establish healthy habits for life, but sometimes it feels like a landmine. Trying to make those choices, balancing with what kids will eat, but here to sort it all out and give us those key messages about clean eating and processed foods.

Nutrition expert and prolific writer, Elizabeth Ward, masters in Science and Registered [00:01:00] Dietician nutritionist. She's the author of My Plate for Moms, how to Feed Yourself and Your Family Better and Expect the Best, your Guide to Healthy Eating Before, during, and after Pregnancy. And the Complete Idiot's Guide to Feeding Your Baby, and in her latest one, the Menopause Diet Plan.

I also love her Better is the new perfect, fabulous saying is her always sage and well-written blogs. She's a well-regarded nutrition expert, former spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. Has done thousands of interviews, presented at professional meetings, and backed up with private prep for counseling children and adults.

She's a rockstar mother of three, and my friend. Welcome

Elizabeth: Elizabeth. Hello. I was wondering if you were gonna say I was the mother of three, because that is the street cred that I need for this discussion. Absolutely,

Kathleen: absolutely. So [00:02:00] let's jump right in because there's so much confusion. So let's start with helping our audience understand that processed foods is a spectrum, but what is the difference between processed foods like milk?

And something that has 25 ingredients and can live on the shelf for years, or the ultra processed foods.

Elizabeth: So the whole notion of processing is kind of difficult and it's not clear cut, even though the headlines would, um, make you believe that, that we have it down. It's not a clear cut science. So you brought up milk.

So there's like, according to one system that's used to classify, uh, processed foods called Nova, uh, milk, plain milk is in. Category one the least processed food. Whereas chocolate, there's four categories. Chocolate milk would be in, you know, category four because it's got sugar and chocolate and maybe some other, [00:03:00] I don't know, additives in it.

I don't know, because every brand is different, so you can't really say, so it's really broad when you talk about, you know, what is uh, a processed food. And I think it's important to remember that nearly. Every food that we eat is processed in some way. And that processing has a lot of advantages, especially when it comes, uh, to children.

Um, especially when it comes to children whose parents don't have a lot of money for food. And I know that sounds weird, but you know, as we go on, um, we can talk about some of the. Uh, you know, products that you mentioned that, you know, have a laundry list of ingredients, well, sometimes those are vitamins and minerals that kids would otherwise be missing out on.

Kathleen: So you can't just go by the list of ingredients. And I love how you talked about that for parents, there's certain foods like cereal. Oh my gosh. So cereal is, you don't just grow flakes of wheat [00:04:00] out in the, um, in the fields. You, it has to be processed to get to that point. And then they add vitamins and minerals.

And these are good, healthy foods. So not all processed foods are bad, but so many of the ones that are on that. Other end of the spectrum are high in calories and fat and sugar and salt, and low in sugar and vitamins. So those are the landmines. We need parents to understand that you can't take issue with baby carrots.

They don't grow that way. They have to be processed. So processing is can be simple. But how about when it's not so simple and they're ultra processed?

Elizabeth: I mean, neither one of us is talking about a steady diet of, you know, um, orange fish shaped crackers, should we say, um, and fast food burgers and fries, and.

You know, fruit, drinks, and soda. We are not talking about that. When we talk about, um, healthy, uh, healthier or nutritious, I should [00:05:00] say. Pros, high ultra processed foods. Do you know that technically we're talking about whole wheat bread, we're talking about tofu, we're talking about seltzer water, those things.

According to that category that I mentioned earlier, Nova, is that those foods are in category four, which blows my mind because, um, it really gives them an unfair shake. They are lumped in there with, you know, packaged cookies that you get from the supermarket, um, and potato chips. It's just not right. So you can't just say that a food is not good for kids or adults because it's ultra process, because the system that we have going now is just completely confusing.

And frankly, I don't even think you need to think about how pro how process something is. You know, you. Need to maybe look at the nutritional merits, [00:06:00] um, of the food. And certainly an orange, you know, cheese puff has no nutritional merits. I'm not saying you can't eat it, it's a fun food. Um, but something like, you know, breakfast, cereal and whole wheat bread has a ton of nutritional benefits.

Absolutely.

Kathleen: So how should parents tackle this? Because the kids have their desires, they want those orange puffed things, whether they're shaped like crackers or they're, you know, a little puff. They want this kind of stuff. So is it okay to get it? Are there better alternatives? How do we navigate? Going through the grocery store, is there a way to look at food labels that will help parents say, okay, you know, this is where I draw the line.

When I was, my kids were little. I used to draw the line at added sugar, but then back then we didn't even have that category on the food labels, but it was right how much sugar was gonna be in that cereal. That's how I help them, you know, say, all right, let's look at [00:07:00] these labels. Let's pick what can parents do today to help.

You know, get kids involved and get them to buy into eating healthier food.

Elizabeth: Well, I think that, you know, kids, okay, so with kids you don't say to them, gee, you need to eat this way so you can live longer and you can avoid, no, that doesn't work. Right, right. And you know, as you as a pediatric specialist know that, right?

That you don't talk to them about longevity and avoiding chronic illness, um, when they're a little bit older, uh, they can start to understand concepts of feeling energetic. Doing well on the playing field, doing well in the classroom. Mm-Hmm, uh, you know, feeling and, uh, feeling good, feeling energetic.

Which is what they want. Nobody wants to feel awful. Um, when they're little, little, just don't offer this stuff to them. That's really where a lot of this starts. Like we think it's funny when a, you know, a, a 2-year-old, we give them one of our french fries, you [00:08:00] know, at, um, at, in the restaurant. Oh, he likes it.

Isn't that funny? Oh, loves it. You know? Then give him a little bit of, uh, soda. And they're, oh, isn't that funny? Oh, he makes such a cute face. That kind of stuff that you have total control over this kid for like the first few years of his life. I mean, let's, let's be serious and you. You know, if you just don't introduce a lot of these foods, you don't have 'em in the house, that's fine.

But you also have to teach them balance. They, as they get older and they start school, right, maybe kindergarten it starts, or maybe even preschool, they see other kids. With these foods that maybe their parents have bought them. And I think the concept there is, you know, that, you know, we, there are foods to grow on and there are, you know, extra foods and you, you know, sometimes you just have to put your foot down and say, no, you're not eating potato chips every single day.

Don't buy them, don't them into the house, don't buy them. Right. You know, [00:09:00] you have to say no. And it's tough. I mean, I do not envy. Young parents these days because everything is just out there, you know, and it's out there. So you have kind of an, this is what I've been seeing on the internet a lot. This group of parents that have got swung the other way too, where they're not giving their kids, you know, anything processed.

I saw someone make their own corn flakes the other day on the internet. Oh, that's crazy.

Kathleen: Okay. Have it though. Who has the time, absolutely better spent elsewhere. But how about the fact that you just mentioned whole wheat bread? Yeah. That it is in some classifications, it's, it's at that highest process.

How do parents know? Is it okay to have chicken nuggets? Is it okay to have soft drinks? Like is a hundred percent juice the only way to go? But then. Shouldn't there be limits? I mean, there's so many challenges for parents to try to figure out, because what I mean, I have grandchildren, they like [00:10:00] hot dogs, they like hamburgers, they like chicken nuggets.

They like french fries. They don't eat vegetables. Nothing green passes their lips unless it's blended up in a smoothie and they don't know what's in there. So it's hard.

Elizabeth: Yeah. I'm not saying I didn't have my challenges. I'm not, I didn't have my ch I had challenges, I don't call them picky ears. They're selective and they're selective for a certain reason.

It could be because some, some kids have texture issues. Um Mm-Hmm. That some kids are extremely sensitive to the environment, which means they have a very heightened sense of smell. They have a very, um, and kids are super tasters. Anyway, right? So if you give them broccoli, they're like, wow, wow, I can really, really taste this.

Our taste buds have been, you know, dead to a certain point because we're older dulled

Kathleen: over the years, right?

Elizabeth: That's why we're throwing salt on everything, trying to taste it, you know, sometimes. So, you know, with them, they really. If [00:11:00] they can really get kind of grossed out by certain things. And, uh, one of my, one of my daughters, um, one of her first sentence, not one of her first sentences, but I heard her string these, these words together when the broccoli passed in front of her at a family dinner.

She said, no, Bucky, my plate. Do not put that broccoli on my plate all died. I mean, we all just died laughing, but she hated really strong smelling things. So, I mean, we're not talking about food preferences and things like that. I know, you know, in this talk, but I think, um, you know, I feel like if you don't offer it to them, um, on a regular basis, they don't.

Ask for it. So, you know, you give them chicken nuggets one time and you're dead, you know, because

Kathleen: Right. That's what they want. Well look at the kids' meals. I mean, that's what's on them. It's not, there's not a lot of good [00:12:00] choices when you take kids out either.

Elizabeth: I know. So we're, we're in this

Kathleen: rot and clearly eating too many of these kinds of foods does put kids at risk for obesity or heart disease or type two diabetes.

So. How do we swap it out? How do we swap out whole foods that are closer to the ground and, you know, and maybe, and still things like whole wheat bread for those ultra processed foods.

Elizabeth: So, um, you know, whenever you, you know, this is hard, but you know, whenever you get a chance, you need to cook stuff from scratch because Uhhuh, you can make delicious chick.

Delicious chicken nuggets from scratch. And now I don't want people to come away from this conversation like, oh, she said, make everything from scratch goes, believe me, I'm not making corn flakes from scratch. Right. We need convenience. Yeah. Made like Oreo sandwich type cookies from scratch the other day too.

Okay. Um, no, I mean, you, everyone has their limits. You have to figure out what your limits are. So [00:13:00] certainly there are many, many processed foods out there that are worth, you know, your kids. It is worth giving to your kids, like the cereal, the bread,

Kathleen: the milk, any kind of vegetable,

Elizabeth: the canned beans, you know, um, frozen, tama, things like that, that kids.

It can't always give them everything that they want. Like a, again, you have to mix it up. And if you have more than one kid and they have all these different, you know, you have all these different eating preferences that you're trying to satisfy. Oh yeah. Ugh. It's exhausting. I get it. Um, but, you know, can you make your own pizza instead of buying a frozen pizza?

That kind of a thing. Like, you know, that's easy.

Kathleen: Yes, it really is. You can buy the dough. I mean, all of my grocery stores sell the dough. So all you have to do is roll it out and then you can put on the toppings. And maybe that's a place to put some vegetables, you know, underneath the tomato sauce. A little stealth eating.

Elizabeth: [00:14:00] Absolutely. And the thing about that is, um. You can make two of them and then you have them for lunch later on. You know? So always making double if you're cooking, always, always making double, but also looking for products that you know, have the least amount of sodium in them, have the least amount of added sugar in them.

You know, have the least amount of saturated fat. So if you're going and, you know, going to the, the grocery store and you wanna have chicken nuggets or breaded chicken filets, you need to shop around. You need to take those because there's some

Kathleen: good ones that are convenient.

Elizabeth: Right? Absolutely. Absolutely.

Um, and then there are foods that. You know, are sometimes foods like hot dogs. Um, not a big fan. I'm just not a big fan of hot dogs. But you know what, um, you, that's fine. I mean, and I'm, again, I'm not saying make your own macaroni and cheese all the time, but it doesn't [00:15:00] really take that long, you know, to do it.

It's almost as long as it takes to like

Kathleen: boil the water and put the,

Elizabeth: you're

Kathleen: right. Absolutely. All the ingredients are probably right in your pantry

Elizabeth: and refrigerator. Well, they're, they're, and you know, I'm not, also not a big fan of like always sneaking things into Kit, but you know what? I'm not above that either.

Um Mm-Hmm. I've done it myself, myself. If it works

Kathleen: right,

Elizabeth: it works. You sneak vegetables and. And, you know, you puree something and you put it in with the mac and cheese. Well, let's say you're using the packaged macaroni and cheese. Um, you can also put, you know, pureed butternut squash in there and stir it around.

And there you go. You know, what you've done is overall you've decreased the sodium in, uh, a content. And you've boosted the, the, um, vegetable content and you can

Kathleen: buy that frozen, the butternut squash, you can buy the puree frozen. So you don't even have to, you know, make it yourself. You can have it in your freezer [00:16:00] and Right, you know, when you buy these things.

So I think we need. Parents to just spend a little bit more time at the grocery store reading the label. So you say focus on sodium saturated fat, and now we have that line that where added sugars are right.

Elizabeth: So, and I think a good, a good guideline there for added sugars is like if, you know you can, okay, so it's got, um, eight grams, let's say, per serving.

And well, what does that mean? Well, you can visualize that, that's two teaspoons of sugar, two level teaspoons. So one teaspoon of sugar has four uh, grams of, uh, carbohydrate in it. So that's a good visual. Um, for people to remember. Yeah. And again, I don't always think that the processing, um, really matters.

And I always wonder like about that because we're just confusing people. I. Um, about it. And I think what we really need to do is [00:17:00] choose foods based on their nutritional merits. Always try to go for the fresher fruits and vegetables, the more whole foods. But don't, you know, just don't ignore the fact that grains are fortified with B vitamins and um, and iron and there's a reason for that.

Yes, there is a reason why are they? Because, um, kids are, um, you know, among kids and, and women, young children and women are the groups of people that are at the greatest risk for iron, uh, deficiency, anemia. And, you know, that affects a kid's ability to learn. Mm-Hmm. So, um, and grow and do a lot of things.

Energy. Yes. Energy. Absolutely. And so the B vitamins help, um, harness that energy, uh, from carbohydrates, which is. What grain foods are. So, you know, when you look at a list of ingredients [00:18:00] and you don't understand them, maybe take, go to the internet and say, well, what is ascorbic acid? Well, that's vitamin C.

You know, you have to put it in its technical form, it the, you have to put that in there. And you know, you can't be freaked out by the ingredients. You just have to kind of look them up and say, oh, oh, that's okay. It's vitamin C, it's added vitamin C. It's fine.

Kathleen: Well, you also said eat as fresh as you can, but when you can't afford fresh, as long as you're choosing frozen or cans that don't have a lot of additional ingredients, so no.

You know, do the low sodium or no added sodium versions of canned foods. Always do the, like the, like the butternut squash I just referred to. It should, you'll look at it. There's one ingredient and there might be something like ascorbic acid so that it doesn't turn brown. You know, that's part of, it's preservative, but not a problem.

Right. So, and Liz in the grocery store, should we just stick to the perimeter?
No [00:19:00]

Elizabeth: bakery is on the perimeter. There you go. I, oh, I think that that is the weirdest advice ever. Um, I agree. No. No, because lots and lots of food, healthy foods, nutritious foods are found in the aisles. Why? You're kidding me. It's not like the aisles are filled with candy and, uh, you know, other less nutritious foods.

That's where the canned beans are. That's where the, um, enriched grains are. Um, the brown rice. Brown rice. Right. Um, exactly. Frozen foods. My grocery store has three aisles of frozen foods. Um, and if I, if I just did the perimeter, I wouldn't even. Get to them because they're in the middle of the grocery store.

So, so ignore that. That's a myth. It is not reality. Yeah. It was a huge myth. I mean, where would I get my frozen spinach and my frozen blueberries and Right. You know, if I, if I just shop the perimeter, I would end up leaving with, [00:20:00] you know, a cake and, um,

Kathleen: you would ultra. Processed food, right? Yeah. Alright, so lemme ask you, so when we see this term all the time, and yet I know it's not a term that is, um, described by the government, so manufacturers can use it anywhere they want, but what does it mean to eat clean?

What does clean eating? What does. Oh, what does that mean? And does that

Elizabeth: mean it, it's not processed. It's the saddest term ever. I think it's so sad. Um, I, when people ask me about that, I always say like, well, okay, so if you eat clean, does that mean that everyone else eats dirty? Dirty? Right? What does that mean?

Um, it, it's, it's, it's nothing. It's, it's, it's nothing. It's a marketing term that's makes most people crazy. I mean, I think there's no, there's no definition of it, but to me it means that, um, you know, you're eating foods that have

[00:21:00] no preservatives in them, which is ridiculous because vitamin C is a, is a preservative and it's natural.

Um, and, you know, I, I. Uh, it is, it is like, you know, you don't eat anything that's processed at all and go for it, and unless you're

Kathleen: growing it and picking that tomato out of your garden, pretty much everything else is gonna have some minimal amount of processing to get into the package, to sit on the shelf, to add that vitamin C I mean, it's processing is getting a bad rap and doesn't deserve it.

Oh no. So clean eating. Ignore it.

Elizabeth: Ignore it. I mean, what would you do if you had a child that had celiac disease and you know, you, and you didn't have, we didn't have processing you. That kid would, there would be a lot of foods that that child. Could not eat. Um, people who have lactose intolerance, same thing.

Um, lactose free milk is considered a highly processed food by [00:22:00] that brilliant system called Nova. Um, ridiculous. Does that mean you should avoid it? Absolutely not. Absolutely not.

Kathleen: Right? So forget the Nova system. Go to the grocery store, look for quality foods, and also keep in mind it's about the overall dietary pattern.

Right. You know, and foods are not good or bad. I mean, you've referenced some, you know, fun foods. Mm-Hmm. I like to think, you know, stock your house with really healthy foods and then get those fun foods when you go out, when you go to the park or Yeah. You know, make it more of a treat so that what you have at home, you continue to reinforce that good snacks are an apple with maybe some peanut butter or you know, foods that and peanut butter's processed, but.

It's good for you.

Elizabeth: Yeah, that's another, and it's delicious and kids love it. Peanut butter is considered an ultra processed food. Um, but if you get the natural kind, you know, and you, uh, and it separates and it's gooey and your kids hate it, um, [00:23:00] you know, yeah, it's less processed, but your kids aren't eating it, so what does it matter?

Um, you're not getting the benefits of it. Yeah. I agree with you. I mean, I always, um. Say like, if you're gonna keep soda in the house and then you're gonna tell your kids constantly, no, you can't have it. How does that make

sense? Like, I don't, I don't get that. Um, that is gonna be way more effort on your part to be constantly saying no.

Be a

Kathleen: role model instead. Yeah. You know, like if that's what you want, you get it when you go out. If that's, that becomes an issue at your house. Oh yeah.

Elizabeth: Yeah. That's something that we always say. When they were little, we said, oh, you can have, we don't keep soda in the house. You know? I said, oh, you can have it when we go out.

And we would go out like once, maybe twice a week, and they would have soda and the rest of the time they drink milk.

Kathleen: There you go. I mean, I think being, you know, setting the table, eating together, being that role model, stocking your [00:24:00] house with all the things, these are the kinds of things parents can do.

And just spend a little bit more time in the grocery store choosing those chicken nuggets. And then once you've made the choice and you know the family likes them, well then you don't have to go through that process over and over again. Right. But clean eating is not really about clean eating. No. And process.

Foods is not a bad word. You just wanna avoid those, those things that are at the, the tail end. And that would be like, give us an example. What are those things at the tail end that you really ought to try to eat less of?

Elizabeth: Well, the things I call fun foods, you know, like, uh, you know, snack chips, cookies, candy, night cookies, soda.

Kathleen: Because all those foods, you don't need them for growth or development.

Elizabeth: No. Or health, no. You, if you eat, and it's same thing like with kids, 85 to 90% of the time, you know they're eating really nutritious foods, whether they're processed or not. That is a very good idea. And then the rest of the stuff that, the thing [00:25:00] where I see pe, uh, parents get a little bit confused is around the snacks.

You know? Yeah. There are snack, there are, I think of snacks as nutritious mini meals. They're not treats, which is why mm-Hmm. A handful of goldfish and a

juice drink, which has hardly any juice in it, to me, is not a snack to grow on. It's a treat. So

Kathleen: snacks are important. I love that. Mini meals because I think, you know, you gotta think about your kids.

They need so much nutrition for growth and development, so all these vitamins and minerals and, um, complex carbs and protein and healthy fats. This is, this is what they grow on. So it's up to us as parents to make sure that we present it. You could. All you can do is present it, but don't lose hope. Keep presenting.

And when there are none of those crackers or puffs in the pantry, they're gonna reach for that apple or that orange, or you know, maybe you'll [00:26:00] even get 'em to eat celery sticks with that little peanut butter and those raisins on top. Ants on a log

Elizabeth: as bring back ants on, or a dip. Use a dip. Yeah. Or make a dip.

Exactly. Yeah. And yeah, they, you're, what, what you said is so on point, they, they do need a lot of nutrition and, and you know, a lot of times parents will stress out because, you know, oh, my kid ate, uh, you know, I'm giving him a snack. He's not going to eat, you know, that much at his next meal. But if the snack is, you know, a balance, like we were just mentioning some of those snacks, it doesn't matter what he eats at his next meal.

Do you know what I mean? Mm-Hmm. Like, absolutely, because he already had. A nutritious snack. So again, a worry is off your shoulders.

Kathleen: Yes. Yeah. If you approach it that way. And I love the idea of those smoothies. My grandchildren drink 'em all the time. It's the way we get green things into them.

Elizabeth: Yeah.

Kathleen: You know?

And you can boost with the little protein powder if you need. So smoothies are often a great way to, [00:27:00] to help kids expand their palette. Just don't make 'em too sweet. Right. But there's all kinds of things you can do. And as Liz, as you always say. Better is the new perfect.

Elizabeth: It's, believe me, it takes a lot of work.

So, um, I get it right. Just keep,

Kathleen: keep plugging away at it and you know, like, just keep trying to get your kids to eat healthier because you are establishing lifetime habits. And I love it when I hear my adult children say something like, oh my God, I couldn't order that. If, if my life depended on it. It's full of.

Fat and sugar and it's like I just smile from ear to ear. It's like, yeah, I know. Over time it really works and it does help establish good eating habits. And good eating habits are what go. What's going to reduce the risk for all these chronic diseases?

Elizabeth: Exactly. Including

Kathleen: obesity. So,

Elizabeth: exactly. And you don't want that.

Well,

Kathleen: Liz, I give you the last word. So what, what would you like to leave with our parents on the whole topic? [00:28:00]

Elizabeth: I just wanna reiterate that, you know, it's not like I sailed through mothering my children. No one does. Nobody does. I ha I mean, I think as dieticians we have a little more knowledge about what is.

Going on in terms of what they need and what to do. But, uh, nobody's perfect here. And, um, you know, you, like you said, Kathleen, I cannot, I can't emphasize the fact that, you know, they're looking to you, uh, for, for guidance, whether you think so, or they are or not. They're sponges. Mm-Hmm. And they're absorbing everything in their environment.

So take a look at your own eating habits sometimes, and that may. You know, inform you about, you know, how to feed your children That's right. And eat together.

Kathleen: That's, that's really, you know, it's so important to be able to model healthy behaviors, good manners, good conversation. And then, you know, like that, that whole process is really so fundamental to [00:29:00] raising healthy eaters, is trying to eat together.

And it doesn't have to be every night. It doesn't have to be at dinner, it could be breakfast. Whenever you can get that opportunity and really maximize it. So right Elizabeth, you're amazing. You are a rockstar. You are so full of great advice. I hope everyone follows you because you have so much to offer and, and you truly are a nutrition expert.

And thank you so much for being my guest today. Thank you for having me. And thank you listeners for dialing in. We hope that you go to Nutrition for Kids. Remember that four is numeric and sign up for our email link. Check the links out where you can listen to the podcast. Thank you.