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Health > Diet > Nutrition

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The seven shortcut foods nutritionists never eat

Many kitchen cupboard staples can be classed as ultra-processed foods, which studies have linked to harm in every major organ in the body

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Nutritional therapist Yalda Alaoui warns that seemingly healthy time-savers aren't always as good as they seem Credit: Rii Schroer

Luisa Metcalfe

10 December 2025 12:00pm GMT

Perhaps you finish your [Sunday roast](#) with gravy made from granules, or you make a salad at work with pre-prepped salad leaves and that bottle of vinaigrette stashed in your desk drawer.

But Yalda Alaoui, a nutritional therapist and founder of the gut health and anti-inflammation platform [Eat Burn Sleep](#), warns that these seemingly healthy time-savers aren't always as good as they seem.

In fact, many of these kitchen cupboard staples, such as stock cubes, can be classed as [ultra-processed food \(UPF\)](#), which was recently linked to harm in every major organ in the body, according to three papers published in the *Lancet*.

“It's okay to have things that are pre-made,” says Alaoui. “They can be a great way to whip up a meal quickly, but choose them well if you don't want to regularly consume additives which can have a lasting impact on your gut.”



‘I take the approach of damage limitation rather than perfection,’ says Alaoui Credit: Rii Schroer

Alaoui, who follows an [anti-inflammatory diet \(high in plants and fats\)](#) to manage two autoimmune conditions, says, “I take the approach of damage limitation rather than perfection, but there are things that I do not touch, such as emulsifiers as they can change the consistency of the gut.

“We know that cancer is linked to the immune system and to chronic inflammation, which starts in the gut, and even [cardiovascular disease](#) is linked to gut health.

“The problem is that today we're not eating foods that are high in [prebiotics](#) (the food for our good bacteria), and probiotics (the good bacteria itself), and

we're consuming more additives that disrupt the gut, so it's a double hit."

Here is Alaoui's list of the everyday shortcut foods she will never eat – and what you should choose instead.

1. Pre-chopped veg



Bags of pre-chopped vegetables contain less nutrients than their frozen counterparts

Buying bags of chopped and ready-to-use vegetables such as carrots, broccoli, curly kale and stir fry mixes seems to offer a solution to the labour-intensive work of washing, peeling and slicing that making a meal involves.

However, Alaoui warns that although these bags, found in the fresh produce section of the supermarket, may seem like a healthy alternative, they're actually depriving you of essential vitamins.

"When you cut a vegetable or piece of fruit, they are exposed to the air and start to oxidise, which is why pre-chopped vegetables start to brown," she says. "They also quickly lose nutrients, particularly vitamin C and antioxidants. Every hour your vegetables are sitting in your fridge, there are fewer nutrients."

Swap

Opt for bags of frozen vegetables instead, which are harvested, peeled, chopped and frozen within hours.

“Although freezing leads to some nutrient-loss, it also stops further degradation,” says Alaoui. “I buy frozen chopped onions and frozen sofrito, a mix of chopped onion, celery and carrot that’s used as the base of many dishes.”

2. Coleslaw

Like bottled [salad dressing](#), pre-made coleslaw contains thickeners and emulsifiers such as guar gum and xanthan gum. “If I were to buy pre-made coleslaw I would look out for these additives and if it has them, I wouldn’t eat it,” says Alaoui.

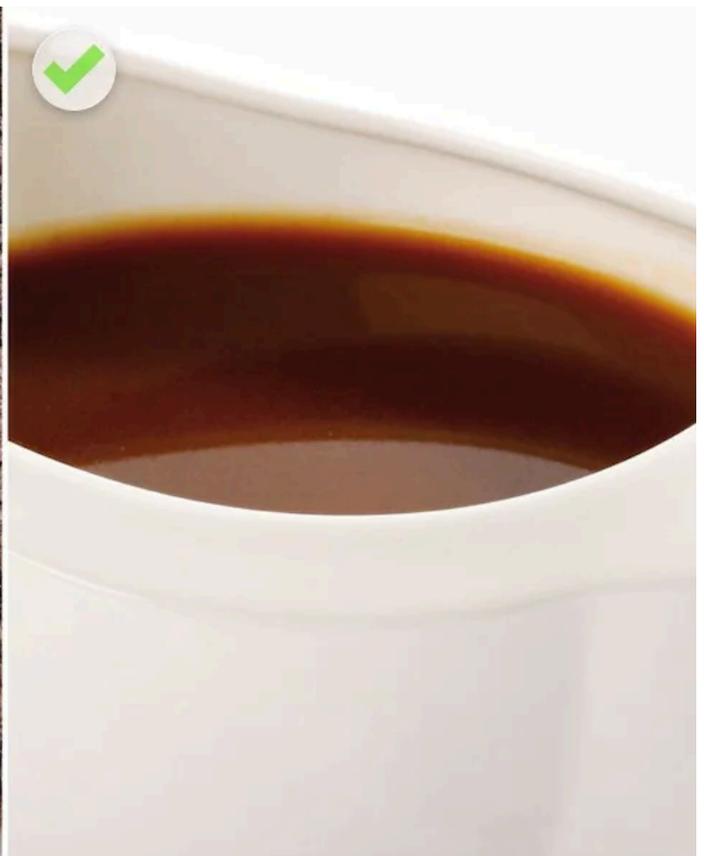
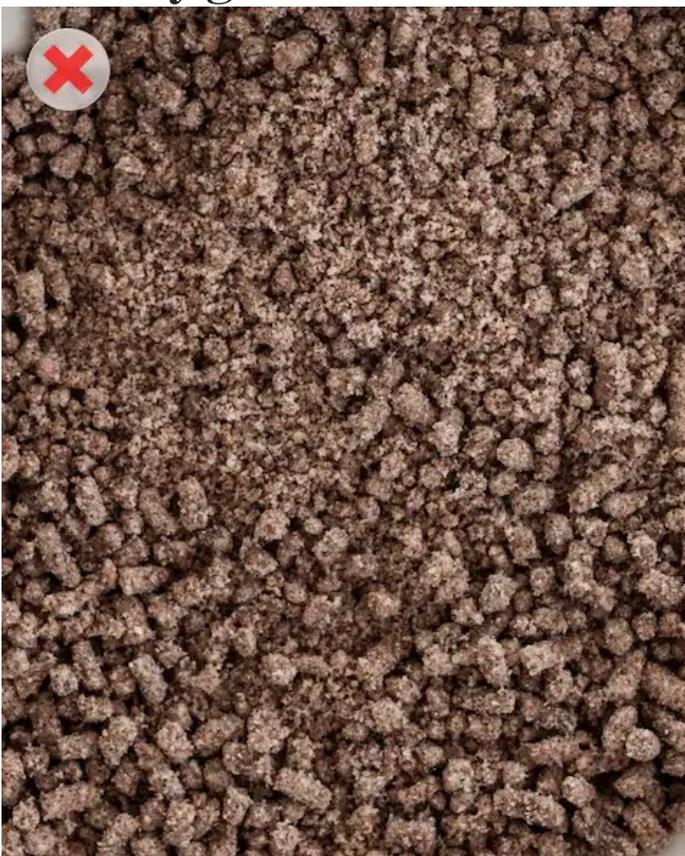
Swap

Make your own coleslaw by putting cabbage, carrot and onion in the food processor, or use a mandolin to slice them quickly.

“I make my [mayonnaise](#) at home using a bit of avocado oil or extra virgin olive oil,” she says. “You add an egg, a bit of lemon and a tiny bit of oil. Mix with a hand blender, then add more oil and salt, mix again until the consistency is right, and you have mayo.

“Or make a coleslaw with Asian flavours, mixing a dressing of sesame oil, mirin, tamari or coconut aminos, which is a less salty alternative to soy sauce.”

3. Gravy granules



Homemade gravy is a much healthier option than granules, which contain E numbers and flavour enhancers

It may as well be law that a roast chicken or beef joint cannot be served without gravy, but many time-poor cooks will agree that adding boiling water to a helping of dried granules makes a rich, tasty gravy that's just as good as the real thing, right?

Wrong, says Alaoui. "Gravy granules aren't food, they're ultra processed – filled with E numbers, flavour enhancers such as MSG and food dyes."

Swap

Head to the fridge section of your supermarket to buy pre-made [gravy](#) instead. "Read the ingredients to make sure it's free of additives," she advises.

"Or, if you're roasting a chicken, pour a centimetre of water at the bottom of your roasting tin. This steams the bird, making it super juicy, and creates a natural gravy. Mixing that liquid with the pre-bought sauce will give it even more flavour."

4. Stock cubes

Stock cubes bring an undeniable umami depth to food, but they are also considered UPFs with additives such as the thickeners maltodextrin and maize starch, colours and flavour enhancers. "I don't use stock cubes any more as some have so many nasties in them," says Alaoui.

Swap

Instead, stock up on herbs and spices. "I open my spice drawer and experiment with the flavours until I find combinations I like," she says.

"If I'm making Indian food, I'll use turmeric, fenugreek and coriander; if it's Italian I add dried basil or mixed herbs; for more Middle Eastern food, I throw in cinnamon and sumac.

"You can also use garlic powder and salt, but choose rock, sea salt or Himalayan salt which are lower in sodium than fine table salt.

"Anchovy paste and miso paste can also add depth and a wonderful savoury umami flavour similar to stock cubes."

5. Grated cheese



If you can't face grating cheese yourself, try crumbling feta, which contains probiotics and is easier to digest

It might seem like a no-brainer to add bags of grated cheese to your big shop for topping family favourites such as baked potatoes and bolognese by the handful.

However, they include hidden ingredients that might end up putting you off your lunch.

“These products use anti-caking agents such as potato starch and cellulose powder,” says Alaoui, over-consumption of which can lead to bloating and wind.

“Grating cheese takes less than a minute, then just whack the grater in the dishwasher.”

The kind of cheese you choose also makes a difference. “Aged cheese such as mature cheddar contains more calcium, protein and probiotics.”

Swap

Really can't face grating yourself? Try crumbling feta over your dish. “Feta contains probiotics, it's easier to digest, as it's largely made from sheep milk and as it's salty, so taste your food before adding more salt,” she says.

6. Salad dressings

“One of my pet peeves is ready made salad dressing,” says Alaoui.

“Manufacturers use emulsifiers and thickeners, such as xanthan gum, which disrupt the intestinal flora, to ensure that the mix doesn’t split and is one uniform colour.”

These bottled dressings are invariably eaten with a ready-to-eat bagged salad but Ms Alaoui advises staying away from that too. “They’re washed with a low chlorine solution that can affect thyroid function,” she says.

“I don’t buy pre-washed vegetables and salad – I buy them dirty and wash them myself.”

Swap

“Make your own dressing,” says Alaoui. “Take a jam jar, add a teaspoon of mustard, a tablespoon of vinegar, some olive oil and shake it.

“Or make a [honey](#) and mustard dressing by mixing wholegrain mustard, white wine vinegar, olive oil, salt, pepper and a teaspoon of honey. It will last on the shelf for a week.”

7. Custard powder

We are slap-bang in the middle of custard season, a time when hearty meals can only be followed by warming crumbles, sponges and steamed puddings topped by the world’s most comforting sauce.

While Bird’s Original Custard Powder, which is mixed in a saucepan with milk and sugar, wins on the nostalgia front, Alaoui points out, “The list of ingredients isn’t too long but it contains the food colouring annatto norbixin. It’s generally considered safe but it could cause an allergic reaction.”

Swap

Even fresh custard contains gums, stabilisers, flavourings and added colours. Waitrose’s No. 1 Madagascan Vanilla Fresh Custard, £3.10, however, is thickened only by tapioca starch, which is used as an alternative to cornstarch.

The best option, however, would be to make this at home, she says. Whisking together milk, cream, egg yolks, cornflour, vanilla extract and sugar takes up to 15 minutes on the hob.

**For more information, visit [eatburnsleep.com](https://www.eatburnsleep.com)*

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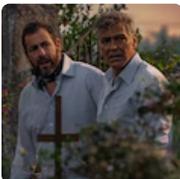
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10 December 2025 12:00pm GMT

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