

Processed Foods: What's OK and What to Avoid

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Published February 11, 2019

Reviewed February 2020



Processed food has a bad reputation as a diet saboteur. It's blamed for obesity rates, high blood pressure and the rise of Type 2 diabetes. But processed food is more than boxed macaroni and cheese, potato chips and drive-thru hamburgers. It may be a surprise to learn that whole-wheat bread, homemade soup or a chopped apple also are processed foods.

While some processed foods should be consumed less often, many actually have a place in a balanced diet. Here's how to sort the nutritious from the not-so-nutritious.

What Is Processed Food?

"Processed food" includes food that has been cooked, canned, frozen, packaged or changed in nutritional composition with fortifying, preserving or preparing in different ways. Any time we cook, bake or prepare food, we're processing food.

Processed food falls on a spectrum from minimally to heavily processed:

- Minimally processed foods — such as bagged spinach, cut vegetables and roasted nuts — often are simply pre-prepped for convenience.
- Foods processed at their peak to lock in nutritional quality and freshness include canned tomatoes, frozen fruit and vegetables, and canned tuna.
- Foods with ingredients added for flavor and texture (sweeteners, spices, oils, colors and preservatives) include jarred pasta sauce, salad dressing, yogurt and cake mixes.
- Ready-to-eat foods — such as crackers, granola and deli meat — are more heavily processed.
- The most heavily processed foods often are pre-made meals including frozen pizza and microwaveable dinners.

The Positives of Processed

Processed food can help you eat more nutrient-dense foods. Milk and juices sometimes are fortified with calcium and vitamin D, and breakfast cereals may have added fiber. Canned fruit (packed in water or its own juice) is a good option when fresh fruit is not available. Some

minimally processed food such as pre-cut vegetables and pre-washed, bagged spinach are quality convenience foods for busy people.

If you want to minimize your intake of processed food, aim to do more food prep and cooking at home. Base meals on whole foods including vegetables, beans and whole grains.

Look for Hidden Sugar and Sodium

Eating processed food in moderation is fine, but many of these foods may contain high amounts of added sugar and sodium.

Added Sugars

Added sugars are any sugar that is not naturally occurring in the food and has been added manually. Added sugars aren't just hidden in processed sweets. They're added to bread to give it an appealing browned hue, and there often is a surprising amount added to jarred pasta sauces and cereal. Added sugars often are used in low-fat foods to improve taste and consistency. The grams of carbohydrate on the Nutrition Facts label also includes naturally occurring sugars which may be a significant amount in foods such as yogurt and fruit. The updated Nutrition Facts label specifies how many added sugars are in a product. Another way to look for added sugars is to review a product's ingredient list and look for added sugars among the first two or three ingredients including sugar, maltose, brown sugar, corn syrup, cane sugar, honey and fruit juice concentrate. Ingredients are listed by weight so the first two or three ingredients are the most prevalent.

Many manufacturers already have started to adapt the new label on their products, and the new Nutrition Facts label will appear on all food items by January 1, 2021. Learn more about the new Nutrition Facts labels by visiting the [FDA website](#).

Sodium

Processed foods are major contributors of sodium in our diets because salt is commonly added to preserve foods and extend shelf life. Most canned vegetables, soups and sauces have added salt. Choose foods labeled no salt added, low-sodium or reduced-sodium to decrease the amount of salt you're consuming from processed foods.

What Is a “Processed” Food?

What exactly *is* a processed food? Our Nutrition Editor breaks it down for you.

By [Sidney Fry, MS, RD](#)

June 03, 2015

By definition, a processed food is a food item that has had a series of mechanical or chemical operations performed on it to change or preserve it.

Processed foods are those that typically come in a box or bag and contain more than one item on the list of ingredients. For most of us, it's not realistic to avoid *all* processed foods. Some are actually very healthy, like precooked whole grains, Greek yogurt, nut butters, organic stock, tofu, frozen vegetables, and unsalted canned beans.

Here's our test: Look at the ingredient list, and ask yourself if it's something you could make at home. If it can only be made in a lab or through a chemical process (like high-fructose corn syrup, hydrogenated oil, soy protein isolate, or aspartame), then consider it highly processed. This doesn't mean you have to make everything yourself—jobs, kids, and everyday life often limit the amount of cooking one can do. But you can still buy versions of ketchup, mayonnaise, and crackers with simple, short ingredient lists. (For

example, original Triscuit crackers are made from whole wheat, oil, and salt. That's it.)

Surprisingly, some of the most highly processed foods are advertised as being the healthiest, including low-fat foods, breakfast cereals, whole-wheat bread, frozen meals, and condiments.

- Low-fat foods like crackers, cookies, and salad dressings often have added sugar and salt to make up for flavor, and gums or stabilizers are added to make up for texture. Some even have more calories than their higher-fat counterpart.
- Breakfast cereals: Whether flaked, puffed, shredded, or extruded (think Cheerios), nearly all breakfast cereals are highly processed. Look for those made with whole grains and little to no added sugar, salt, or artificial colors and flavors. Aim for five ingredients or less. Your best bet? Try muesli, a mixture of raw rolled oats, nuts, dried fruit, and seeds.
- Whole-wheat loaf bread: There's a reason those perfectly sliced, long rectangular loaves sit on the shelves for weeks at a time without spoiling. They contain artificial preservatives to help maintain freshness. Buy whole-grain bread from your local bakery, where ingredients are kept simple with just flour, water, yeast, oil, and salt.
- Many condiments are filled with sodium, sugar, preservatives, gums, stabilizers, artificial colors, and artificial flavors. Whoa! Try seasoning foods first with herbs and spices.