

Processed Foods: Nutritional Heroes or Villains?

Processed foods seem to be getting a bad rap lately. Health problems—from acne to obesity, cancer to early puberty—have been supposedly linked to eating too many processed foods. A recent consumer survey reveals that 43 percent of people think of processed foods as unfavorable, and many people are trying to avoid buying and eating them. This tip sheet will help clear up the confusion around processed foods so that you can choose healthy, balanced, affordable, convenient and tasty foods!

What are processed foods?

Food processing is any change that is done to a food before we eat it. Simple food-processing methods include cooking, freezing, drying, canning, salting ... even washing our food. More complicated food-processing methods include making ready-to-eat meals—such as frozen entrees, pizzas and burritos—that can be quickly reheated and eaten.

Why are so many of our foods processed?

People have been processing their food for centuries. Hundreds of years ago, salt was added to preserve meat for times when food was sparse. Preservation is still a big reason to process our foods, leading to a longer shelf life, less waste due to spoilage and the ability to transport perishable foods over long distances. Processing also:

- allows for wider availability of many foods that only have a short season (think frozen berries in winter)
- enhances food safety by killing bacteria that can cause disease
- improves the taste, texture and consistency of foods
- makes foods more convenient to eat.



Research also shows that without the fortification processes used in food manufacturing, many Americans would not achieve their recommended intakes for many nutrients. Examples of foods that have higher levels of nutrients due to processing are:

- iron-fortified breakfast cereals
- vitamin B-fortified breads and grains
- vitamin D-fortified milk.

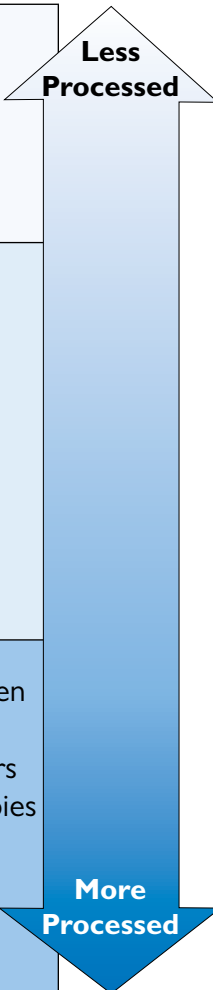


Without these added nutrients, our disease risk increases, and our health can suffer. On the other hand, certain 'negative' components can be reduced in foods to improve their healthfulness. Fat-free and low-fat dairy products and reduced-sodium pretzels and crackers are examples of foods that are processed to help people meet their health and nutrition goals.



How do I make sure that I am eating 'healthy' processed foods?

The chart below shows the range of processed foods available. Minimally processed foods are similar to, and sometimes even more nutritious than, the same foods in their unprocessed form. While the “ready-to-eat” category contains some foods that are high in calories and nutrient-poor, this category also includes convenient, ready-to-eat meals and snacks that provide a significant source of nutrients.

<p>Minimally processed foods; generally very nutrient-dense</p>	<p>Salad in a bag Baby carrots Pasteurized milk Roasted nuts Whole-grain bread</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Less Processed</p> 
<p>Preserved and enhanced foods; often a mixture of ingredients</p>	<p>Frozen and canned fruits and vegetables Dried fruit Breakfast cereals Bakery items Enriched bread Pasta, rice, crackers Canned meats and beans Cheese and yogurt</p>	
<p>Ready-to-eat foods; some provide considerable calories, sodium and sugars</p>	<p>Lunch meat, rotisserie chicken Nut butters Granola bars and energy bars Frozen dinners, pizzas, pot pies Canned soups Chips, pretzels Ice cream, frozen desserts Fruit drinks, sodas</p>	

Use food labels to help you choose healthier processed foods

If you are trying to lose weight or have health concerns, read the nutrition facts label on the package to learn about a food’s calorie and nutrient content. Look for information about ‘positive’ nutrients, such as protein, calcium, potassium, magnesium, iron and vitamins A, C and D. These nutrients are often hard to get in the diet.



Use processed foods to round out healthy choices

Keep in mind that there are no foods to *always* eat or *always* avoid; individual foods should be eaten and enjoyed within an overall balanced diet. Dietary patterns over time—not individual foods, meals or even days—determine our health and longevity. When chosen carefully and eaten in moderation, processed foods are an important part of our diet and contribute greatly to the affordability, convenience, safety, nutritional content and taste of our meals and snacks!

For more information on processed foods, please visit: <http://www.foodinsight.org/For-Consumers/Farm-to-Fork-Resources/tabid/1400/Default.aspx>