



Processed foods

Also known as Convenience Foods or Commercially Prepared Foods or Packaged Foods

What are processed foods?

“Processed” refers to food that has undergone a “change in character”. Processed foods have been altered from their natural state for safety reasons and for convenience. The methods used for processing foods include canning, freezing, refrigeration, dehydration and aseptic processing. Processed foods can be as simple as cut, pre-washed spinach versus a head of spinach being the unprocessed form.

Processing foods may be appropriate and some processed foods are healthy.

For example:

- Milk would be considered a processed food because it is pasteurized to kill bacteria and homogenized to keep fats from separating.
- While fresh may be best, freezing vegetables preserves vitamins and minerals and makes them convenient to cook and eat all year around.
- Fruit and vegetable juice is a processed food.

Many processed foods are made with trans fats, saturated fats, and large amounts of sodium and sugar. These types of foods should be avoided.

Examples of processed foods include:

- frozen fish sticks and frozen dinners
- packaged cakes and cookies
- boxed meal mixes, such as Macaroni and Cheese and Rice A Roni
- sugary breakfast cereals
- processed meats, i.e. luncheon meats, sausages, ham, bacon, chicken strips, chicken nuggets, hot dogs, bologna
- packaged high-calorie snack foods, like chips and cheese snacks
- high-fat convenience foods, such as cans of ravioli
- canned foods with lots of sodium
- white breads and pastas made with refined white flour

What does this all mean?

Information

- If you shop for processed foods, be sure to look for products that are made with whole grains, low in sodium and calories, and free of trans fats.
- Pay attention to the serving size and balance out the processed foods you eat with a fresh salad and whole grain bread.
- Purchase fresh ingredients, or food with minimal processing, and always read the Nutrition Facts label.

Cost

- Fresh ingredients and food with minimal processing tend to be LESS expensive than processed foods. It's more cost effective to cook from fresh ingredients and/or foods with minimal processing.

Nutrition

- In general, fresh foods may be expected to contain a higher proportion of naturally-occurring vitamins, fiber and minerals than an equivalent product processed by the food industry.
- Food processing can lower the nutritional value of foods, and introduce hazards not encountered with naturally-occurring products. Vitamin C, for example, is destroyed by heat and therefore canned fruits have a lower content of vitamin C than fresh ones.
- A single serving of highly processed foods contain a significant portion of the recommended daily allowance of sodium. Without a significant amount of sodium in highly processed foods, the taste would be compromised. Research shows that diets high in sodium are linked to high blood pressure and the development of cardiovascular disease.

Health

- Processed foods often include food additives such as flavorings and texture-enhancing agents, which may have little or no nutritive value and sometimes considered unhealthy.
- Preservatives added or created during processing to extend the 'shelf-life' of products, such as nitrites or sulphites, may cause adverse health effects.
- Use of low-cost ingredients that mimic the properties of natural ingredients (i.e. cheap chemically-hardened vegetable oils in place of more-expensive natural saturated fats or cold-pressed oils) have been shown to cause severe health problems.