



Processed Food: Friend or Foe?

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The term “processed food” gets thrown around a lot in regards to healthy eating. There seems to be a main theme around all diets that include “don’t eat processed foods.” The problem is these diets are unintentionally restricting some healthful foods and makes it extremely difficult to eat healthier with time or money restrictions. Processed food goes beyond the typical chips, boxed meals, and commercial baked goods that we tend to think of. Processed food also includes bagged lettuce, precut fruit, and homemade whole wheat bread.

According to the USDA a processed food is any change to food from its natural state. This includes washing, cutting, cooking, freezing, packaging or changing a food’s nutrition composition by fortifying, preserving, or preparing in different ways. That means majority of foods sold in a grocery store and prepared at home from sliced potatoes to a bag of chips are technically processed foods. The difference between the sliced potatoes and the bag of chips is how much processing it went under. Processing can range from minimally to highly processed.

- Minimally processed foods, like bagged lettuce or cut watermelon undergo processing for food preservation and/or convenience.
- Other foods like canned/frozen vegetables & fruits, and canned tuna are processed at peak freshness to maintain top nutrition quality.
- Highly, or also called ultra, processed foods are ready-to-eat or premade food and meals. Crackers, deli meat, chips or similar snacks, candy, frozen pizza, or microwave meals fall into this category.

Are processed foods as a whole bad for us? No. Minimally processed foods can help make up a healthful diet. Preservatives are added to foods to help keep us safe from foodborne illness. They also prolong the shelf life of foods which increases the variety of foods available to us all year long. Just think about all the produce we wouldn’t have available during winter in Iowa without preservatives!

It’s the ultra-processed foods that we want to be mindful of how much/often we’re eating these foods. They usually are higher in refined grains, saturated fat, added sugar, and sodium. Having a diet consisting mostly of these foods is linked to poorer health outcomes. So, when walking down the grocery aisle, how do you pick the most healthful processed foods?

Keep an eye on the nutrition label and ingredients list for “hidden” fats, salt, and sugar. When reading the nutrition facts label, aim for 5% daily value or less per serving of saturated fat, sodium, and added sugar. If the % daily value is 20% or higher, that means that food has a lot of the fat/salt/added sugar,

Here are some highly-processed foods to pay special attention to

- Saturated fat: fried snacks (chips), baked goods, beef sticks, frozen entrees/snacks.
- Sodium: Canned soups, sauces, condiments, flavoring mixes, and packaged flavored rice/pasta/meals, frozen meals/snacks.
- Added-sugar: You all should be a pro on this one! Keep an eye on those sneaky added sugars in condiments, sauces, salad dressings, and snack bars.

Compare labels on products for the lowest amount of saturated fat, sodium, and added sugar. Look for healthier alternatives when possible.