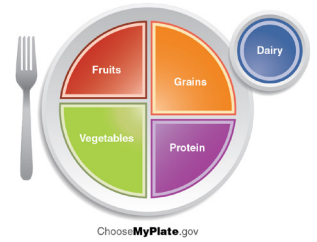




A Pioneering Area Agency on Aging



Processed Foods: What's Ok and What to Avoid

Processed food has a bad reputation of being “junk food.” These foods are blamed for increased obesity, high blood pressure and the prevalence of Type 2 diabetes. But processed food is more than potato chips. It may be a surprise to learn that homemade soup or chopped apples are also processed foods.

While some processed foods can contribute to poor health, 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 simply means that a raw food product has been modified in some way for convenience. We create processed foods at home when we make a smoothie or freeze leftovers. Processed food falls on a spectrum from minimally to heavily processed:

- Minimally processed foods, such as roasted nuts, are simply prepped.
- Foods processed at their peak to lock in nutrients include canned and frozen produce or canned tuna.
- Foods with ingredients added for flavor and texture (sweeteners, oils, colors and preservatives) include jarred pasta sauce, salad dressing, yogurt and cake mixes.
- Ready-to-eat foods, such as crackers and deli meat, are more heavily processed.
- The most heavily processed foods often are frozen or pre-made meals, including frozen pizza and microwaveable dinners.

The Positives of Processed

Processed food can be beneficial to your diet. Milk and juices are often fortified with calcium and vitamins, and breakfast cereal may have added fiber. Canned fruit is a good option when fresh fruit is not available. Minimally processed foods, like pre-cut vegetables, are great for busy people. These prepackaged fruits and veggies are a wonderful addition to help individuals eat more produce.

Look for Hidden Sugar, Sodium and Fat

Eating processed food in moderation is fine, but we should be on the lookout for hidden sugar, sodium and fat.

Sugar

Sugar is added to many different processed foods, so always check the label and ingredient list for added forms of sugar. Just because a product says ‘organic’ or ‘natural’ does not mean it's better and healthier. Sugar isn't just hidden in processed sweets. It's added to bread, jarred pasta sauces, and cereal. Avoid foods listing sugars like sugar, maltose, corn syrup, honey and fruit juice concentrate among the first two or three ingredients.

Sodium

Most canned vegetables, soups and sauces have added sodium, which enhances taste, texture, and is a preservative. We need some sodium, but we often consume more than the recommendation of less than 2,300 milligrams a day. Three quarters of our sodium intake comes from processed foods and only 20 to 25 percent of it comes from salting food. Look for reduced or low sodium on labels. Rinsing canned beans and vegetables with water before eating and/or cooking with them is a simple step to reduce sodium content by about 40 percent.

Fats

Added trans-fat helps make food shelf-stable. Trans-fats raise our bad cholesterol while lowering our good. According to the FDA, a product can still claim it has zero trans-fat if each serving has less than half a gram of the trans-fat. Check the ingredients list and label carefully for partially hydrogenated vegetable oils, which indicates it's going to have some amount of trans-fat in it.

Call 402-441-7159 to talk with one of our expert registered dietitian nutritionists to discuss your diet goals.



Healthy Processed Foods

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Doctored up Minestrone Soup

Sometimes you need something quick, tasty, and healthy. Why not take a can of your favorite canned soup and jazz it up a bit?

Ingredients:

- 1 (14.5 ounce) can diced tomatoes
- 1 (15.25 ounce) can corn, rinsed
- 1 (15 ounce) can minestrone soup
- 1 (15 ounce) can mixed vegetables
- 1 (15 ounce) can white (or black) beans, rinsed

Directions:

1. Simply dump all cans into medium sized pot and heat over stove top until hot. Or place all ingredients into a microwave safe dish and heat on "high" for five minutes.
2. Serve hot with Parmesan garnish and toast.

