Processed Foods: What's OK and What to Avoid

Processed food has a bad reputation as a diet saboteur. It's blamed for our nation's obesity epidemic, 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 with caution, many actually have a place in a balanced diet. Here's how to sort the nutritious from the not-so-nutritious.

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

- Minimally processed foods — such as bagged spinach, cut vegetables and roasted nuts — are often 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 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 sometimes 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 are quality convenience foods for busy people.

Look for Hidden Sugar, Sodium and Fat - Eating processed food in moderation is fine, but consumers should be on the lookout for hidden sugar, sodium and fat.

Added Sugars
Added sugars aren't just hidden in processed sweets. They're added to bread to give it an appealing browned hue, and there's often a surprising amount added to jarred pasta sauces and cereal. Look at a product’s ingredients 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.

Sodium
Most canned vegetables, soups and sauces have added sodium, which enhances taste and texture and acts as a preservative. We need some sodium, but we often consume much more than the Dietary Guidelines for Americans' recommendation of less than 2,300 milligrams a day. Canned vegetables, soups and beans can be packed with nutrients, so don't cross them off your shopping list entirely. Instead, look for reduced or low sodium on labels.

Fats
Added fats can help make food shelf-stable and give it body. Trans fats — which raise our bad cholesterol while lowering our good cholesterol — are on the decline in processed foods, but you should still read food labels. According to the FDA, a product can still claim it has zero trans fats if each serving has less than half a gram of the fat.

Source: Academy for Nutrition and Dietetics, Taylor Wolfram, MS, RDN, LD; article adapted and edited for decreased content.

www.eatright.org/resource/food/nutrition/nutrition-facts-and-food-labels

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