

# IN THE KNOW ABOUT NUTRITION

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## Processed Foods: What's OK and What to Avoid

Processed foods have developed a bad reputation in our society, and are often frowned upon. It is blamed for our nation's obesity epidemic, high blood pressure and the rise of Type 2 diabetes. Yet, processed food is more than boxed mac n' cheese, candies, potato chips and drive-thru hamburgers. It may shock you to learn that whole-grain breads, cereals, pastas or crackers; milks and yogurts; nut butters; and canned or frozen fruits and vegetables are all processed foods.

While some processed foods should be limited and consumed with caution, many others have a place in a healthy, well-balanced diet. Here is how to sort the nutritious from the not-so-nutritious.

### What is Processed Food?

Processed food refers to any food that has been purposely altered in some way prior to consumption. It includes foods that have been cooked, canned, frozen, packaged, or changed in a nutritional composition with fortifying, preserving or preparing in different ways. Anytime we cook, bake, or prepare food, we are processing food!

### **Processed Foods Range from Minimally to Heavily Processed:**

- Minimally processed foods such as bagged spinach, cut vegetables and roasted nuts – often are simply pre-prepared 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 pre-made meals including frozen pizza and microwavable dinners.

### The Positives of Processed

Some processed foods can be greatly beneficial to your diet! Milk and 100% juices can be 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.

The trick is to be able to distinguish between foods that have been minimally processed versus heavily processed! Foods like pre-cut apple slices, hard-boiled eggs, canned tuna and frozen vegetables are minimally processed and are good nutritious choices. On the other hand, heavily processed foods can be recognized as food not in its original form, such as potato chips, sodas, donuts, cookies and candies.

### Look for Hidden Sugar, Sodium and Fat!

Eating processed food in moderation is OK, but consumers should remember to be on the lookout for hidden sugar, sodium and fat by checking the Nutrition Facts Label.

## Added Sugars

Added sugars are any sugar that is not naturally occurring in the food. Even though the food may be labeled 'organic' or 'natural,' that does not mean it is free of added sugars. The same holds true with reduced-fat and fat-free products. Added sugars often are used in low-fat foods to improve taste and consistency. Compare food labels to find the product with more protein and fiber and less saturated fat and sugars.

The grams of carbohydrate on the Nutrition Facts Label also includes naturally occurring sugars which may be a significant amount in foods such as yogurt and fruit. Instead, review a product's ingredient 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*. Beginning in July 2018, grams of ADDED sugars will be included on the Nutrition Facts Label.

## Sodium

Salt is commonly added to preserve foods and extend shelf life; thus, making processed foods a major contributor of sodium to our diets. Most canned vegetables, soups and sauces have added salt, so it is important to choose foods labeled "no salt added", "low-sodium" or "reduced-sodium" to decrease amount of salt we consume.

However, we do need some sodium in our diet, but we often consume much more than the Dietary Guidelines for Americans', which recommends less than 2,300 milligrams a day. Again, remember to check that Nutrition Facts Label to see how much you are consuming.

## Fats

Added fats can help make food shelf-stable and enhance flavor. Trans fats – which raise our bad cholesterol while lowering our good cholesterol – are on the decline in processed foods. The FDA has banned artificial trans fats from the food supply, but companies have until 2018 to comply. So continue to read food labels and check both the Nutrition Facts Label and ingredient list for trans fats.

In addition, look for zero grams of trans fats on the label and no partially hydrogenated oils in the ingredient list. These oils contain trans-fat, which does not have to be listed on the Nutrition Facts Label if it amounts to less than 0.5 grams per serving. However, even this small amount can add-up and be harmful.

## Remember!

Familiarize yourself with the Nutrition Facts Label and Ingredient List! Do more cooking and food prep at home to maximize control over the food processing.

**NEW LABEL / WHAT'S DIFFERENT**

**Servings: larger, bolder type**

**Serving sizes updated**

**Calories: larger type**

**Updated daily values**

**Actual amounts declared**

**New: added sugars**

**Change in nutrients required**

**New footnote**

Nutrition Facts	
8 servings per container	
<b>Serving size</b>	<b>2/3 cup (55g)</b>
<b>Amount per serving</b>	
<b>Calories</b>	<b>230</b>
<b>% Daily Value*</b>	
<b>Total Fat</b> 8g	<b>10%</b>
Saturated Fat 1g	5%
Trans Fat 0g	
<b>Cholesterol</b> 0mg	<b>0%</b>
<b>Sodium</b> 160mg	<b>7%</b>
<b>Total Carbohydrate</b> 37g	<b>13%</b>
Dietary Fiber 4g	14%
Total Sugars 12g	
Includes 10g Added Sugars	20%
<b>Protein</b> 3g	
Vitamin D 2mcg	10%
Calcium 260mg	20%
Iron 8mg	45%
Potassium 235mg	6%

\* The % Daily Value (DV) tells you how much a nutrient in a serving of food contributes to a daily diet. 2,000 calories a day is used for general nutrition advice.

Source:

<http://www.eatright.org/resource/food/nutrition/nutrition-facts-and-food-labels/avoiding-processed-foods>

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