

What is a Processed Food? You Might Be Surprised!

What comes to mind when you think of a processed food? You're right if you think of items such as cookies, snack chips and carbonated drinks. But you might be surprised to learn that most foods we eat are processed.

Read on to get the facts about processed foods – and answers to some common questions about them.

Processed Foods Defined

Food processing is any deliberate change in a food that occurs before it's available for us to eat. It can be as simple as freezing or drying food to preserve nutrients and freshness, or as complex as formulating a frozen meal with the right balance of nutrients and ingredients.

The Prehistoric Origins of Food Processing

The era of food processing began about 2 million years ago when our distant ancestors put flame to food and “discovered” cooking. After that came fermenting, drying, preserving with salt, and other primitive forms of food processing. This ultimately led to the modern food processing methods of today, which give us an abundant, safe, convenient, affordable and nutritious food supply.

A few examples of processed foods include:

- Canned and frozen fruits and vegetables
- Packaged foods labeled “natural” or “organic,” such as cereals, fresh meat and poultry, and jarred baby foods
- Foods with health and nutrition claims on the label, such as “may reduce risk of heart disease,” “low in fat” or “high in calcium”
- Foods fortified with nutrients such as fiber, vitamin D and omega-3 fatty acids
- Foods prepared in quick-service and fine-dining restaurants, cafeterias and food courts, sports arenas, coffee shops and other locations



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The Continuum of Processed Foods

Processed foods can be placed on a continuum that ranges from minimally processed items to more complex preparations that combine ingredients such as

sweeteners, spices, oils, flavors, colors, and preservatives, with many variations in between. The chart below gives some common examples.

Type of Food	Examples
Foods that require little processing or production (also called “minimally processed”).	Washed and packaged fruits and vegetables; bagged salads; roasted and ground nuts and coffee beans
Foods processed to help preserve and enhance nutrients and freshness of foods at their peak.	Canned tuna, beans and tomatoes; frozen fruits and vegetables; pureed and jarred baby foods
Foods that combine ingredients such as sweeteners, spices, oils, flavors, colors, and preservatives to improve safety and taste and/or add visual appeal. (Does not include “ready-to-eat” foods listed below.)	Some packaged foods, such as instant potato mix, rice, cake mix, jarred tomato sauce, spice mixes, dressings and sauces, and gelatin
“Ready-to-eat” foods needing minimal or no preparation.	Breakfast cereal, flavored oatmeal, crackers, jams and jellies, nut butters, ice cream, yogurt, garlic bread, granola bars, cookies, fruit chews, rotisserie chicken, luncheon meats, honey-baked ham, cheese spreads, fruit drinks and carbonated beverages
Foods packaged to stay fresh and save time	Prepared deli foods and frozen meals, entrées, pot pies and pizzas

From Farm to Fork: How One Food Provides Many Options



In this example, corn can be processed to create many different foods and ingredients that consumers enjoy. Certain types of corn grown in a field can be picked and eaten off the cob. Or, corn kernels can be removed from the cob and preserved in cans or jars for enjoyment later. Popcorn is a special type of corn that is grown to pop! Popcorn kernels are dried on the cob, removed, popped

and packaged as popcorn snacks or as kernels that can be popped at home. To make tortilla chips, manufacturers mix ground corn and water to form a dough (masa) which is then baked or fried into a chip. Corn syrup is made from refined corn starch and is used as an ingredient in making desserts, in sauces and relishes, and to sweeten certain foods and beverages.



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Five Common Questions about Processed Foods

Q: Are processed foods safe?

A: Yes, in fact processing foods often makes them safer. For example, heating foods helps remove harmful bacteria. Pasteurization is a common heating process applied to milk to kill harmful organisms. Canning and freezing foods such as meats, fruits and vegetables helps them to stay fresher longer.

Q: Do processed foods cause obesity?

A: Most nutrition experts agree that no one type of food causes obesity – obesity results from consuming more calories than the body uses, regardless of where the calories come from. To maintain a healthy weight, it's important to balance calories consumed with regular physical activity and to only occasionally enjoy single portions of treats such as fried foods, snack chips, desserts, candy, fruit drinks and soft drinks. Some processed foods may actually aid with weight management because they include ingredients that reduce the calorie content of foods, such as low-calorie sweeteners.

Q: Do processed foods lack nutrition?

A: Because processed foods include such a wide range of products, their nutritional values vary widely, too. For instance, frozen vegetables can be more nutrient-rich than fresh because they are picked and frozen at their nutritional peak. Furthermore, processed foods that are fortified with vitamins, minerals or other nutrients can help people reach the recommended intake levels for those nutrients. An example is orange juice fortified with calcium and vitamin D. Some processed foods, such as fried foods, desserts and candy, supply calories but few other nutrients.

Q: Are processed foods expensive?

A: Again, the wide range of choices means a wide range of prices. For instance, buying frozen strawberries might be less expensive than buying fresh strawberries *out of season*, but preparing tomato sauce with home-grown tomatoes *in season* might be less expensive than buying jarred tomato sauce.

Q: Are any processed foods natural?

A: The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) doesn't define the term "natural" on food labels, but generally allows the term if the food doesn't contain added colors, artificial flavors, or other synthetic substances. According to that definition, numerous processed foods could be considered "natural." These include many fruit and vegetable products, grain and dairy products, and meat, poultry and fish products. A few examples are packaged cooked and uncooked chicken, potato chips, rice, frozen spinach and jarred applesauce.

For more information about modern food production and processing, please visit:

<http://www.foodinsight.org/understandingourfood.aspx>



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