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Harvard Men's Health Watch {http://www.health.harvard.edu/newsletters/harvard_mens_health_watch/2015/july}

Not all processed foods are unhealthy

Don't be misled by well-intentioned advice. Some processed foods offer nutritional value and convenience.

Nutrition gurus often urge us to spurn processed foods in favor of whole ones. But not all processed foods are necessarily bad. "Most food needs to go through some sort of processing for it to even be edible and digestible," says Stacey Nelson, a registered dietitian and manager of clinical nutrition at Harvard-affiliated Massachusetts General Hospital. "The minute you cook something, you are processing it."

Instead of writing off all processed foods, Nelson advises men to start reading food ingredients to assess the item's nutritional value. "Ignore the marketing claims on the front of the package, flip it over, and go right to the list of ingredients," she says.



Healthy processed foods	
Food	What to do
Canned beans	Rinse off the salty canning liquids and toss beans into garden salads.
Canned salmon, tuna, and other fish	Flake onto salads, or mix with extra- virgin olive oil and chopped celery to make a sandwich spread.
Frozen fruits and vegetables	Look for products that contain only the produce, rather than added processed sauces and seasonings.
Peanut and other nut butters	Spread on whole-grain bread or crackers for breakfast or lunch.
Whole-grain breakfast cereals	Be alert for added sugar in the list of ingredients.
Yogurt (plain)	Top with fresh fruit for breakfast or use as a base for sauce or dressing.

What's a processed food?

Processing includes canning, cooking, freezing, dehydration, or milling. The main concern is with processing that reduces a food's nutritional wealth or adds things, like sodium and sugar that you may prefer to avoid or limit. In particular, watch for these:

Refined grains. Processed foods may contain refined grains, such as white flour and white rice. Milling whole grains removes the bran (which contains most of the fiber) and the germ (which contains protein, fat, vitamins, and minerals). Adding nutrients back after processing, called fortification, may not restore the original nutritional profile.

Consuming too many refined grains has been linked to poorer health, but you don't need to ban refined grains from your diet entirely. Try to shift the balance in the other direction—by introducing more whole-grain products to meals.

Added sugar. Caloric sweeteners, like table sugar and high-fructose corn syrup, are refined carbohydrates. These are considered unhealthy if they take up too much of your diet. Many processed foods contain added sugar.

Easy targets for change are desserts, sweets, and sugar-sweetened beverages. Enjoy these sparingly rather than banning them. "The point is not to demonize particular foods," Nelson says. "It's about the nutritional balance of your diet and making healthier choices."

Sodium. Processed foods from the supermarket often contain a lot of added sodium. At the top of the list are canned soups, breads, frozen foods, and processed meats. Consuming an excessive amount of sodium has been linked to high blood pressure, heart attack, and stroke, although it remains controversial what a healthy daily intake of sodium is.

Trans fats. Some processed foods contain trans fats, which in any amount are associated with higher risk for clogged arteries. These substances form when oils are chemically altered to make them stiffer at room temperature. You are most likely to find trans fats in crackers, cookies, frozen pizza, and baked goods like pastries, pies, and donuts. The "nutrition facts" label on packaged foods lists trans fat levels.

Eating whole foods

Healthy diets emphasize whole foods—those that still contain what nature gave them. They offer a wide variety of nutrients, although cooking with heat can alter the mix. "As much as possible, choose whole foods that have gone through a minimum amount of industrial processing," Nelson says.


But whole foods aren't the whole story. Some processed foods offer valuable nutrients as well as convenience. For example, it's easy to add canned beans or fish to a salad. "Foods that are convenient can actually increase the likelihood that someone will eat a healthier diet," Nelson says.

Frozen foods are also valuable. That's because even the freshest produce loses that freshness pretty quickly, as nutrients degrade from exposure to oxygen, heat, and sunlight. Producers pick and quickly freeze the produce, which retains nutrients.

To check canned and frozen food for overall nutritional value, read the ingredients list. "If the ingredients on the package say 'peas' and not much else, that's a good sign," Nelson says. "You want something that has the minimum of ingredients, and to be able to recognize those ingredients."

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