

What Are Processed Foods and Why Are They so Unhealthy?

What are processed foods?

When talking about processed foods, what often springs to mind is yellow and orange deep-fried food washed down with sweet, fizzy liquid, or supermarket aisles filled with ready meals to save us the toil of cooking. When we think of processed food, we think of convenience.

But like fats, not all processed foods are bad for us. Processed food also includes whole foods that have been altered by freezing, drying, canning, baking, milling, pressing, or pasteurizing. While pies, biscuits, cakes, snacks, and processed meats are for the most part unhealthy, frozen fruits and vegetables; dried legumes, herbs and spices; and wholegrain rice, bread, and cereals are healthy.

These processed foods aren't that far removed from the whole food. When fruit and vegetables are frozen soon after harvesting, they retain more vitamins and minerals than fresh produce transported over great distances from farmer to retailer. The health issues lie with highly processed foods manufactured with sales in mind.

These foods often contain excessive sugar, salt, and saturated fat in a concentrated, convenient source. By concentrating those tastes we have evolved to seek out in nature to give us energy and nutrients, manufacturers trick us into craving their unnatural foods. The aim is not to keep us healthy but to keep us hooked.

Why should we cut down on highly processed foods?

Highly processed foods are low in nutrients

Highly processed foods are low in vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants needed for our body to function properly. They are also low in fiber which helps with friendly gut bacteria, regular bowel movements, and satiety that stops us overeating. In his book *How Not To Die*, Dr. Michael Greger reports studies that suggest fiber reduces the risk of breast and colon cancers, heart disease, stroke, and diabetes.

Highly processed foods contain harmful artificial ingredients

To give them a long shelf life and appealing taste, highly processed foods contain artificial preservatives, colorings, and flavorings. The longer the ingredients list, the more removed the food is from nature. Our bodies don't need unpronounceable chemicals or high-fructose corn syrup, maltodextrin, and all the other unrecognizable corn derivatives.

Highly processed foods may be carcinogenic

Processed meats that are cured, smoked, salted, and fermented have been classified as carcinogenic by the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), the cancer agency of the [World Health Organization](#). These meats include hot dogs, ham, bacon, and sausages. While the [Union for International Cancer Control \(UICC\) advises that the media is careful when reporting health risk statistics](#), they too advise eating less processed food and more fruit and vegetables.

Highly processed foods take away control over our health

When we eat highly processed foods, we have no control over the amounts of sugar, salt, saturated fat, and trans fat. Excess amounts increase our risk of obesity, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and related chronic diseases, such as heart disease, stroke, type2 diabetes, and even dementia and cancer.

Processed foods labeled 'low-fat' or 'healthy' may be anything but. Low-fat products are often high in refined sugar, which is now thought to be a more significant contributor to weight gain. Similarly, 'healthy' granola bars can be loaded with sugar and honey doesn't make it healthy.

[Reading food labels can inform us of the sugar and fat in processed foods.](#) When we know what is in the food we eat, we take back control.

Highly processed foods are only cheap in the short-term

Processed convenience foods might be tempting as a cheap, easy way to feed ourselves but the long-term health cost, as well as the social cost of children growing up not knowing how to cook or stay healthy, can't be ignored. [According to the Harvard School of Public Health, a healthy diet doesn't have to be expensive.](#)

What can we eat for a healthy body and mind?

A whole food, plant-based diet with reduced meat and dairy consumption is a healthy diet. Nutrition experts at the Harvard School of Public Health have created a [Healthy Eating Plate](#) in response to My Plate put out by the U.S Department of Agriculture (USDA). The problem with the USDA's nutrition advice is that it's influenced by food industry lobbyists. The [American Heart Association's diet and lifestyle guidelines](#) are also helpful.

For optimum nutrition and health, Dr. Greger advises cutting out dairy, eggs, and chicken and eating more plant-based protein. Plant-based protein has plenty of beneficial fiber and is free from animal growth hormones that can harm us. Plant-based and vegan diets are healthy provided you don't rely heavily on highly processed food!