

The skinny on processed foods

White bread, packaged cookies and turkey bacon. What do these foods have in common? They are all processed foods.



Processed food is the opposite of “whole food,” or food in its natural state.



WHAT DOES “PROCESSED FOODS” MEAN?

It means the food has been changed from its natural state. White bread, for instance, may contain wheat flour that has been bleached and stripped of some of its nutrients.

Packaged cookies may have bleached and stripped flour in addition to added sweeteners, artificial colors, preservatives and flavors. Turkey bacon is cured, processed and packaged.



NOT ALL PROCESSED FOODS ARE BAD

There is a difference between foods that are minimally processed and “junk foods.” Frozen vegetables, for instance, may be considered “minimally processed.” They are not quite the same as picking the vegetables right from a garden. But if they don’t have added sugar or salt, frozen vegetables are a very healthy option.

In addition, some foods that are considered “processed” can help people eat better. Canned fruit (without added sugar) or bagged salads are a convenient option for many people. They eliminate the extra work of gathering the food, washing it and cutting it.



SUGAR & SALT OVERLOAD

Many processed “junk” foods contain too much added sugar or salt. Also, they may have little to no fiber or vitamins.

Processed foods, including crackers and packaged snacks, are a major reason that people get too much sodium in their diets. Too much sodium raises the risk of high blood pressure and heart disease.

Many processed foods also contain added sugars. The American Heart Association says we should limit added sugars to 6 teaspoons a day for women and 9 teaspoons for men. One 12-ounce soda exceeds that amount. Too much added sugar increases risk for type 2 diabetes and heart disease.



PROCESSED = WEIGHT GAIN?

A recent study by the National Institutes of Health suggests that processed foods can cause weight gain. Participants who were given processed foods ate about 500 calories more per day than people who ate unprocessed foods. They also gained weight, while the people who ate unprocessed foods lost weight. You don’t have to cut all processed foods out of your diet. But cutting back on them — and eating more whole foods — will help you work toward a healthier weight.

Sources: Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, American Academy of Family Physicians, American Heart Association, National Institutes of Health