

What's All the Fuss about Processed Foods?

THE UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE defines processed foods as anything that is not a “raw food commodity.” That means, fruit, vegetables, grain or meat which has been altered in any way, through freezing, canning, cooking, even washing or chopping is technically a processed food.

You can see that processing of foods can be a very positive thing for the consumer:

- Preserving freshness of food picked at the peak of the season and allowing it to be consumed out of season. This would include a bag of frozen blueberries or strawberries.
- Allowing fresh food to be preserved for use later by flash freezing. This would include frozen fish fillets and chicken breasts.
- Providing convenience as in washed lettuce, peeled carrots, shredded cheese and canned cooked beans.

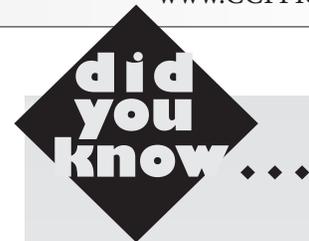
These *minimally* processed foods have few or no added ingredients and are not what we are warned against as culprits to a healthful



diet. It is the *highly* processed foods which are generally unhealthy and may have large amounts of fat, sugar and sodium added during processing. It isn't hard to see why bagged spinach and a package of hot dogs are not in the same category.

Highly processed foods are very often quick, convenient, cheap, claim to be healthy and/or are highly advertised. However, a diet of mainly highly processed foods is usually a poor diet, high in fat, sugar, sodium, calories and low in vitamins and nutrients. A poor diet has been linked to a number of serious health conditions such as type 2 diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, stroke and many cancers.

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- ▶ **March is National Nutrition Month.** This year's theme is "Put Your Best Fork Forward"
- ▶ **National CACFP Week** is March 12th–18th. The Child and Adult Care Food Program provides approximately 1.9 billion meals and snacks to over 3.2 million children.
- ▶ It is recommended that you spend 90% of your food budget on whole foods and only 10% on processed foods.
- ▶ Three-quarters of our dietary sodium comes from processed foods.
- ▶ By rinsing a canned food twice, you can reduce the sodium content by about 40%.
- ▶ Added sugars are found in 74% of all packaged foods, have 61 names and are often difficult to decipher on food labels.

Sources: Eatright.org, CACFP.org, Shape.com, Sugarscience.org

Quotable Quotes

“Too much sugar causes chronic metabolic disease in both fat and thin people, and instead of focusing on obesity as the problem, we should be focusing on our processed food supply.”

– Dr. Robert Lustig
Author of *Fat Chance: Beating the Odds Against Sugar, Processed Food, Obesity and Disease*

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- ◆ Beyond the Kitchen Activity

- ◆ Recipes
- ◆ Food Funny

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So what's a consumer to do?

Read labels:

This doesn't mean "front of the label" nutritional claims which are unregulated. Read the *Ingredient List* and the *Nutrition Facts Panel* for sodium, fats, sugars, corn syrup, high fructose corn syrup, nitrates, other preservatives and other artificial ingredients such as colors and flavors.



Check the ingredient list for sugar on the label but keep in mind many foods such as fruit, milk and other dairy products have "natural" sugar which is included on the nutrition facts panel. Beginning in July 2018, grams of "added sugar" will be included on the nutrition facts panel as well, which will help consumers choose healthier products.

While a long list of ingredients doesn't automatically mean a "bad food" any more than a short list means a better pick (think of a whole grain bread with many different seeds and nuts, versus a juice drink which is water, sugar and only 10% juice). However, a long list of ingredients you can't pronounce likely indicates a highly processed food.

Some foods have the nutrition processed out of them and some are re-added in synthetic form. These are not as healthy as the comparable "whole food". Don't just look for what has been added, but for what has been taken away, for example, refined grains lose fiber, in "reduced fat" products healthy fats are often replaced with sugars and in high heat processed foods vitamins are destroyed.



Here are some simple substitutions to replacing highly processed foods in your menus:

- Serve roasted chicken in place of chicken nuggets
- Serve baked fish in place of fish sticks
- Serve fresh fruit in place of canned fruit
- Serve fresh or frozen vegetables in place of canned vegetables
- Serve plain oatmeal in place of sugary dry cereals
- Serve whole grain breads instead of white breads
- Serve olive oil vinaigrette in place of bottled salad dressing
- Serve water and low-fat milk in place of soda and fruit drinks

The solution is not easy, but it is simple. Load up your shopping cart with whole and minimally processed foods and spend a little bit more time on food preparation. Homemade foods are healthier than their frozen, canned and boxed counterparts. When children are young give them a large variety of healthy, whole and minimally processed foods. If highly processed foods are not a part of their usual diet, they will not miss them. Next time you are tempted to buy a highly processed food, ask yourself why you are making the choice. If you are in a hurry, can you choose a healthier substitute that is just as quick? If a child is begging you, remember, you are the parent/caregiver and you are responsible for your child's health. Look at that awesome responsibility in a new light, as a privilege, not a burden.

— Donna Green RD and Catherine Stafford

KIDS' HEALTH & SAFETY

Safety in the Kitchen

CHILDREN LEARN a variety of skills when they are given the chance to help in the kitchen. They can learn about new foods, healthy eating and cultural/ethnic dishes while they practice reading, math and science! Children enjoy being in the kitchen, helping and doing the grown up activities involved in cooking like measuring, scooping, chopping and mixing.

Encourage children to be involved in meal preparation while taking these precautions to keep them safe:

1. Supervise children in the kitchen at all times.
2. Sharp knives should be kept out of reach unless they are being used by an adult. Give children butter knives or plastic knives to cut up softer foods.
3. Always turn off the stove top and oven when done and teach children that the stove is hot and should not be touched or played with.
4. Cook on the back burners of the stove when possible and turn pot handles inward to avoid being bumped into.
5. Keep electrical appliances away from water to avoid shocks and keep wet hands away from electrical sockets.
6. Keep paper towels, other paper (recipe cards or books), dish towels and pot holders away from the stove top so they don't catch on fire.
7. Do not add water to a pan with hot oil as it can splatter and burn. Never put water on a cooking fire as it can make the fire bigger.
8. Teach children to always wash their hands before preparing food and as needed during and after preparation.
9. Teach children to never lick their fingers, bowls or mixing spoons while preparing food.
10. Clean all items that come into contact with raw meats and eggs immediately.
11. Do not contaminate cooked food by placing it on a plate or other surface that had raw food on it.
12. Teach children that cleaning up is part of food preparation. Wash down counter tops, dishes and spills.



Shamrock Salad

This salad can be made with a combination of almost any fresh vegetables as long as they are green!

Fresh mixed salad greens ... 4 cups	CREAMY AVOCADO DRESSING
Asparagus, blanching and cut 1 cup	Avocado 1 large
Green peas, frozen 1 cup	Garlic clove 1
Celery, sliced 1 cup	Lime juice ½ Tbsp
Cucumber, sliced 1 cup	Olive oil 3 Tbsp
Green onions, sliced ½ cup	Salt ¼ tsp
	Pepper ¼ tsp
	Water ¼-½ cup

1. Toss together green salad veggies. Set aside.
2. Make dressing in a food processor adding just enough water to reach the desired consistency.
3. Toss salad with dressing and serve immediately.

Yield: 16 servings

Meets requirement for fruit/vegetable

— Dressing recipe: www.simplyscratch.com

Asparagus, Chicken & Quinoa Bake

Chicken broth 2 cups	Chicken, boneless cut into strips 1 pound
Milk 4 cups	Bacon, cooked and crumbled ½ cup
Masa corn flour or all-purpose flour 1 cup	Leeks, chopped 1 cup
Salt 1 tsp	Asparagus, cut into 1-2 inch pieces ... 3 cups
Garlic flakes 1 tsp	Sharp cheddar cheese, shredded 1½ cups
Onion flakes 1 tsp	
Pepper ½ tsp	
Quinoa, uncooked 1 cup	

1. Preheat oven to 375°F.
2. In a medium saucepan over high heat, whisk together the chicken broth and flour until smooth and cook for one minute. Add the milk and seasonings and cook, stirring, until thickened.
3. Rinse quinoa. In a large bowl, fold together the sauce with the quinoa, chicken, bacon, leeks and asparagus. Pour into a 9"x13" sprayed baking dish. Top with the shredded cheese and bake for 45-55 minutes covered until the quinoa is sprouted and the chicken is no longer pink. Serve immediately.

Yield: 10 servings

Meets requirement for fruit/vegetable and protein/meat alternate.

— Adapted from www.thecreativebite.com

Activity Corner

BEYOND THE KITCHEN

Enjoy fun ways to teach children about cooking, beyond the kitchen!

Tour factories: If you are lucky to have a food factory in your area, they often will give tours of how the factory is run.

Bakeries: Like factories many local bakeries, if asked for a tour, are happy to give children this learning experience.

Restaurants: At slow times local restaurants may also be willing to give tours of their kitchen. This really gives children a bird's eye view of how things are run behind the scenes.

Cooking presentation: Do you have a professional chef in your area? A cooking presentation or lesson can be a lot of fun. You can even ask a mom, dad or grandma who loves to cook.

Kitchen specialty stores: Tour a kitchen specialty shop and children can learn all about different appliances, kitchen utensils and more. This can really spark the interest of child chefs.

Grocery shopping: Involve the children! It may be easier to go shopping without the children but getting them involved can teach them a lot about healthy food, cooking and planning meals.

This Nutrition Edition is brought to you by:

and is produced by:

**Contra Costa Child Care Council
Child Health & Nutrition Program**

Phone: (925) 676-6117

Fax: (925) 676-5829

E-Mail: nutrition@cocokids.org

Website: www.CoCoKids.org

Program Director Paula James

Co-Editor Donna Green, RD

Co-Editor Catherine Stafford

Food Q: Why are bananas never lonely?
Funny A: Because they come in a bunch!