

Processed food is blamed for obesity rates, high blood pressure and the rise of Type 2 diabetes. While some processed foods should be consumed less often, many actually have a place in a balanced diet.

What Is Processed Food:

Processed food includes food that has been cooked, canned, frozen, packaged or changed in nutritional composition with fortifying, preserving or preparing in different ways. Any time we cook, bake or prepare food, we're processing food.

Minimally processed foods — such as bagged spinach, cut vegetables and roasted nuts — often are simply pre-prepped for convenience.

Foods processed at their peak to lock in nutritional quality and freshness include canned tomatoes, frozen fruit and vegetables, and canned tuna.

Foods with ingredients added for flavour and texture (sweeteners, spices, oils, colours and preservatives) include jarred pasta sauce, salad dressing, yogurt and cake mixes.

Crackers, granola and deli meat — are more heavily processed.

The most heavily processed foods often are pre-made meals including frozen pizza and microwave dinners.

Chemically processed foods, also called ultra-processed foods, tend to be high in sugar, artificial ingredients, refined carbohydrates, and trans fats. Because of this, they are a major contributor to obesity and illness around the world.

Ultra-processed foods tend to taste good and are often inexpensive. However, they usually contain ingredients that could be harmful if consumed in excess, such as saturated fats, added sugar, and salt. These foods also contain less dietary fibre and fewer vitamins than whole foods.

Some examples of ultra-processed foods include:

frozen or ready meals

baked foods, including pizza, cakes, and pastries

packaged breads

processed cheese products

breakfast cereals

crackers and chips

candy and ice cream

instant noodles and soups

reconstituted meats, such as sausages, nuggets, fish fingers, and processed ham

sodas and other sweetened drinks

Added sugar:

Processed foods tend to contain added sugar and, often, high fructose corn syrup. Added sugar contains no essential nutrients but is high in calories.

Processed foods and beverages are among the major sources of added sugar in the diet. Regularly consuming an excess of added sugar can lead to compulsive overeating. It is also linked with health conditions such as obesity, metabolic syndrome, type 2 diabetes, and inflammatory diseases.

Artificial ingredients:

Highly processed foods often contain the following types of chemicals:

Preservatives, which keep the food from going bad quickly.

Artificial colouring.

Chemical flavouring.

Texturing agents.

Refined carbohydrates:

The body breaks down refined, or simple, carbohydrates quickly, leading to rapid spikes in blood sugar and insulin levels.

When these levels drop, a person may experience food cravings and low energy.

Because refined carbs cause frequent increases and decreases in blood sugar, consuming them is linked with an increased risk of type 2 diabetes.

Low in nutrients:

Ultra-processed foods are very low in essential nutrients, compared with whole or minimally processed foods.

In some cases, manufacturers add synthetic vitamins and minerals to replace nutrients lost during processing .

Fruits, vegetables, and grains contain healthful plant compounds with anti-oxidant, anti-inflammatory, and anti-carcinogenic effects. These include flavonoids, anthocyanins, tannins, and carotenoids.

The best way to get the full range of essential nutrients is to eat whole, unprocessed, or minimally processed foods.

Low in fibre:

Most ultra-processed foods are very low in fibre, as natural fibre is lost during processing.

Healthful high fibre foods include:

Legumes

Vegetables

Fruits

Nuts and seeds

Whole grains

