

Nutrition Times

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Are Processed Foods the Bad Guys?



"If you can't pronounce it, don't eat it."

Have you heard this before? As we begin the new year, many people may want to make changes to their diet, such as choosing more "natural" foods. This could include limiting foods that are highly processed. It could also mean avoiding foods that have extra ingredients like artificial flavours and preservatives.

In reality, being able to pronounce a word has no connection to whether it's healthy for you or not. For example, 'thiamin mononitrate' is an ingredient that's commonly added to sandwich bread. At first glance, this ingredient might seem unfamiliar. However, it's actually a B Vitamin!

So, is there any truth behind staying away from processed foods? To answer this question, let's take a look at what processed foods really are.



What are processed foods?

Simply put, they're foods that have been changed from their original forms.

This includes:

1. Adding extra salt, sugar, and/or fat
2. Changing foods from their original forms (E.g. chopping, drying, cooking, canning, or mixing)
3. Adding other ingredients to preserve a food or to improve the flavour or texture (E.g. citric acid for preservation, xanthan gum to keep ingredients from separating)

Nearly every food we eat is processed in some way. What truly matters is *how* the food is being processed. Some foods like apple slices or salad kits only change the way their ingredients look by cutting them into smaller pieces. They're still considered processed foods but are just as healthy for your body.



Foods that are more processed, like breakfast cereals, fall into a bit of a grey area. On one hand, processing can add sugar and strip away fibre. But it can also add vitamins and minerals back in. Not all breakfast cereals are made equally! Choose less processed cereals by looking for options that are whole grain and that have less added sugars (less than 15% Daily Value for sugars per serving without milk).

What about foods that are highly processed?

Unfortunately, many foods we consume are highly processed – and not in a good way. Hot dogs, luncheon meats, potato chips, deep-fried foods, packaged noodles, and soft drinks are just some examples. These foods are high in added salt, sugar and saturated fat.

Consuming these foods on a regular basis can increase your health risks. Eat these foods less often and in smaller amounts.

Tip: Look at the nutrition facts table on food packages. A Daily Value (DV) of 5% or less is a little. A Daily Value (DV) of 15% or more is a lot. Aim for lower % DV for nutrients like sugar, sodium, or saturated fat. Aim for higher % DV for nutrients like fibre, calcium, or iron.

What's the bottom line?

There's nothing wrong with wanting to eat foods that are less processed! However, it's important to know that not every change made to food by processing is bad. Focus on what is being added by processing and what is being taken away.

To learn more, check out these additional resources:

- [Limit highly processed foods - Canada's Food Guide](#)
- [Nutrition labelling: Overview](#)
- [Use the Nutrition Facts Table: % Daily Value](#)

Upcoming Events & Classes

We offer classes on a variety of nutrition topics including:

- Healthy Eating for Pregnancy
- Feeding Babies
- Mealtime Struggles (Picky Eating)
- Preventing or managing chronic disease
- Registration details [here](#).

For a complete list of workshops that are available anywhere in the province click [here](#).

Contact

If you have questions, contact your local Registered Dietitian at Community Health Services:

Medicine Hat	403-502-8200
Brooks	403-501-3300
Lethbridge	403-388-6666

For more information on this or other nutrition topics, go to healthyeatingstartshere.ca



Questions? Email us at publichealthnutrition.southzone@ahs.ca