



Healthy processed food? Yes, please!

In the world of nutrition, the term "processed food" often conjures up images of unhealthy snacks laden with excess sugar, salt, and artificial additives. However, not all processed foods are created equal. In fact, many processed foods can be part of a balanced and nutritious diet.

While it's true that certain processed foods can contribute to health issues when consumed in excess, demonizing all processed foods can overlook options that are tasty and convenient. The key distinction lies in understanding the degree of processing and the ingredients used. Processing itself is not inherently harmful; it's the addition of unhealthy ingredients like refined sugars, saturated fats, and excessive sodium that can detract from the nutritional value of a product. Conversely, many processed foods undergo methods like freezing, drying, or fermentation, which can actually preserve nutrients and extend shelf life without compromising healthfulness.

Navigating the aisles of the grocery store can be daunting, especially when faced with rows of packaged products vying for attention. To make informed choices at the store, consider the following 3 rules:

1. Check the ingredient list: The ingredients list is a window into what's inside the package. Look for products with recognizable, whole-food ingredients listed at the beginning, and be wary of lengthy lists filled with artificial additives and preservatives.

2. Be mindful of added sugars and sodium: Excessive sugar and sodium intake is linked to various health issues, including heart disease and obesity. Choose processed foods with minimal added sugars and opt for low-sodium or no-salt-added versions when possible.

3. Focus on nutrient density: A nutritious processed food should offer more than just empty calories. Prioritize foods that are rich in essential nutrients like vitamins, minerals, fiber, and healthy fats.

Here are a few examples of processed foods that are actually good for you:

- Frozen vegetable medley (no added sauce or salt)
- Whole grain frozen waffles (less than 3 grams of added sugar per serving)
- Pre-cooked brown rice and quinoa blend
- No sugar added trail mix
- Whole grain wraps
- Bean-based pasta
- Roasted chickpea snacks
- Fruit and nut bars (look for less than 5g added sugar per bar)
- Hummus and other bean dips
- No sugar added yogurt (no artificial sweeteners)
- Vegetable and/or bean soup (look for low-sodium options)
- Whole grain, low sodium ramen noodles
- Frozen bean/veggie burgers (look for those based primarily on vegetables, beans, and/or whole grains rather than protein isolates)
- Salsa (see recipe below!)
- Peanut butter (no sugar added)
- Shredded wheat (plain)

5-Minute Corn and Black Bean Salad



Use this crunchy-chewy-savory-spicy concoction as a chip dip, salad topper, or even as a chunky soup.

Ingredients:

- 1 cup tomato salsa (any heat or chunkiness)
- 2 tbsp balsamic vinegar
- 1 15-oz can black beans, rinsed and drained
- 2 15-oz cans corn, rinsed and drained, or about 3½ cups frozen corn kernels, thawed
- ½ cup chopped green onions (spring onions or scallions)
- ½ cup chopped bell pepper (any color)
- ¼ cup chopped fresh cilantro

Instructions:

Puree salsa and vinegar in a blender (a single-serve smoothie blender is perfect for this) to make the dressing. Set aside.

Combine remaining ingredients in a large mixing bowl. Add dressing and mix well.