



Food and Nutrition Myths: Processed Foods

Myth: All processed foods are unhealthy

Answer: Mankind has been processing food since the beginning of time!

Processed foods have been part of human existence for millennia, dating back to the Egyptians who preserved their food with salt, or earlier cultures who dried berries in the sun to save them for winter. Cultures around the world traditionally processed their foods to preserve them for future enjoyment or to make them more digestible. These included fermented dairy products like cheese and yogurt, and plant foods like kimchi, sauerkraut and pickles, not to mention cured meats like sausage and prosciutto.



As we know them today, processed foods made great leaps in the industrial age of the late 19th and early 20th centuries as manufacturers learned how to freeze and can foods with flavor, food safety and convenience in mind. For a longer shelf life and to cut down on bacteria, manufacturers added the chemical preservative sodium benzoate during processing, and salt was added to vegetables to keep their color and texture intact. Unfortunately, as the amount of added salt in our diets increased, the prevalence of hypertension, obesity and other health issues rose, too.

Today, more and more manufacturers are reformulating their products to make them more nutritious by replacing healthier ingredients with more natural ones, and not relying on added fats, sugars and sodium to make their food taste better.

A trend for traditionally processed foods is on the rise, too. Today we see more products on the market including miso, tempeh, kombucha, an array of cheese, Greek yogurt, as well as the sauerkraut and pickles mentioned above. One thing many of these foods have in common is their use of good bacteria to crowd out bad bacteria that can make food spoil. As scientists learn more about the ways good bacteria in our gut support good health, these traditional processing methods – the old ways of creating processed foods – make even more sense.

So how do you select traditionally processed foods for the best of taste and health? Here are a few tips:

1. When shopping for fermented (gut healthy) foods be sure that you're buying the real thing. Because fermentation is an inexact and not totally predictable science involving the growth of living organisms, many food companies have created modern versions of the foods above that are more uniform and consistent but without the health benefits of fermentation. If you see "vinegar" in the ingredient list on pickles or sauerkraut, for instance, it's most likely not been fermented.
2. When shopping for yogurt, buy unsweetened varieties, and check the ingredient list to ensure that it contains live cultures such as *L. bulgaricus* and *S. thermophiles*. For a little sweetness, add chopped fruit or drizzle honey over your yogurt.
3. Look for traditional artisanal cheeses, including raw-milk cheeses; pasteurizing milk kills many of the inherent "good" bacteria that contribute to the world's best cheeses. By all means skip the "processed American cheese food."



Modern Food Processing

For foods processed with more modern methods, check the ingredient lists for ingredients commonly used to prolong shelf life such as:

Added Sugar:

- Words ending in “OSE” such as dextrose, fructose, lactose, maltose, sucrose, sucralose
- Brown sugar
- Raw (Turbinado) sugar
- High-fructose corn syrup
- Fruit juice concentrate
- Honey

Added Sodium:*

- Monosodium glutamate (MSG)
- Sodium bicarbonate (baking soda)
- Sodium nitrite
- Sodium caseinate
- Sodium chloride
- Sodium citrate
- Salt

Trans fats:

- Partially hydrogenated vegetable oil
- Margarine
- Shortening

Preservatives and Additives:

- BHA/BHT
- Food dyes
- Potassium bromate
- Sodium benzoate
- Sulfites

*The words “salt” and “sodium” are not the same thing. Salt, also known by its chemical name sodium chloride, is a crystal-like compound that is abundant in nature and is used to flavor and preserve food. Sodium is one of the chemical elements found in salt.