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What is Processed Food?

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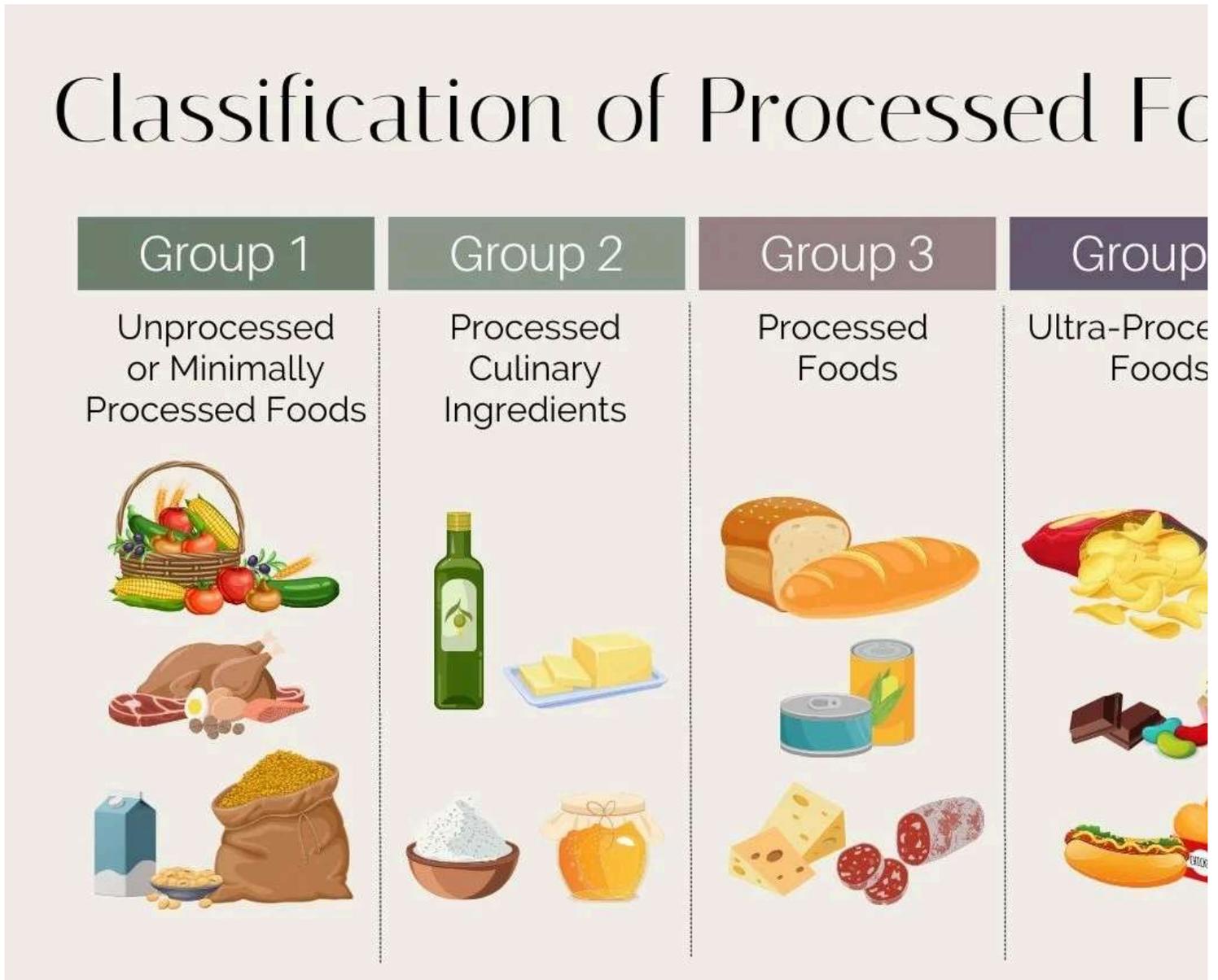
It goes without saying that real food is always the healthiest choice when it comes to
but not all processed food is unhealthy. In fact, many processed foods are very healt
and can save you a lot of time and money in the kitchen. So, let's break down what is
food, what to look for, and what to limit.

DEFINITION OF PROCESSED FOOD

Processed foods are defined as any raw agricultural commodities that have been wa
cleaned, milled, cut, chopped, heated, pasteurized, blanched, cooked, canned, froze
dehydrated, mixed, packaged, or undergone any other procedures that alter the foo
natural state (1, 2). This may include the addition of colors, flavors, preservatives, nutr
sugars, and salt, as well as other substances approved for use in food.

Since the definition of processed food is so broad, practically all food is considered p
in some way, as everything from bagged spinach to frozen pizza is considered "proce
this reason, researchers have developed a food classification system, known as NOV
classifies foods into four levels of processing (3):

Classification of Processed Fo

Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group
Unprocessed or Minimally Processed Foods	Processed Culinary Ingredients	Processed Foods	Ultra-Proce Foods

GROUP 1: UNPROCESSED OR MINIMALLY PROCESS FOODS

Unprocessed foods are the edible parts of plants or animals after separation from na
Minimally processed foods are natural foods altered by methods that include the rem
inedible or unwanted parts and also processes that include drying, crushing, grinding
powdering, fractioning, filtering, roasting, boiling, non-alcoholic fermentation, pasteu
chilling, freezing, placing in containers, and vacuum packaging. Examples of unproce
minimally processed foods include:

- Fruits
- Vegetables
- Grains
- Beans
- Lentils
- Nuts
- Seeds
- Milk
- Eggs
- Meat
- Poultry
- Fish
- Seafood
- Herbs
- Spices

GROUP 2: PROCESSED CULINARY INGREDIENTS

Processed culinary ingredients are those obtained directly from unprocessed or min
processed foods, or from nature by processes such as pressing, refining, grinding, m
drying. In isolation, processed culinary ingredients are unbalanced, being depleted i
most nutrients, and these ingredients are rarely, if ever, consumed by themselves. Ex
processed culinary ingredients include:

- Oil

- Butter
- Lard
- Sugar
- Molasses
- Honey
- Maple syrup
- Salt

GROUP 3: PROCESSED FOODS

Processed foods are made by adding salt, oil, sugar, or other processed culinary ingr
unprocessed or minimally processed foods. Most processed foods have two or three
ingredients, are recognizable as modified versions of unprocessed foods, and are ge
produced to be consumed as part of meals or dishes, and also may be consumed by
themselves as snacks. Processes include preservation or cooking methods, and with
and cheeses, non-alcoholic fermentation. Examples of processed foods include:

- Canned vegetables
- Canned beans
- Fruit preserved in syrup
- Tinned fish in oil
- Smoked fish
- Freshly baked bread
- Cheese
- Ham
- Bacon

## GROUP 4: ULTRA-PROCESSED FOOD AND DRINK PRODUCTS.

Ultra-processed foods are formulations of ingredients that are typically created by a
industrial techniques and processes. Also referred to as highly processed foods, thes
that go beyond the simple addition of culinary ingredients and are typically made by
whole foods into substances including sugars, oils and fats, proteins, starches, and fi
being submitted to hydrolysis, or hydrogenation, or other chemical modifications and
reassembled to create unmodified and modified food substances with little if any wh
Colors, flavors, emulsifiers, and other additives are frequently added to make the fina

more palatable. Examples of ultra-processed foods include:

- Soft drinks
- Candy
- Mass-produced packaged bread and buns
- Mass-produced packaged cookies and pastries
- Cakes and cake mixes
- [Margarine](#) and other spreads
- Sweetened breakfast cereals
- Cereal bars
- Potato chips
- Fruit yogurt
- Fruit drinks
- Chicken and fish 'nuggets' and 'sticks'
- Energy drinks
- Hot dogs

THE SPECTRUM OF FOOD PROCESSING

The processing of food occurs on a spectrum as virtually any unprocessed food can
into a form of ultra-processed food through a series of industrial techniques. It is the
added culinary ingredients, added substances, processes, and techniques used to c
food that determines its level of processing.
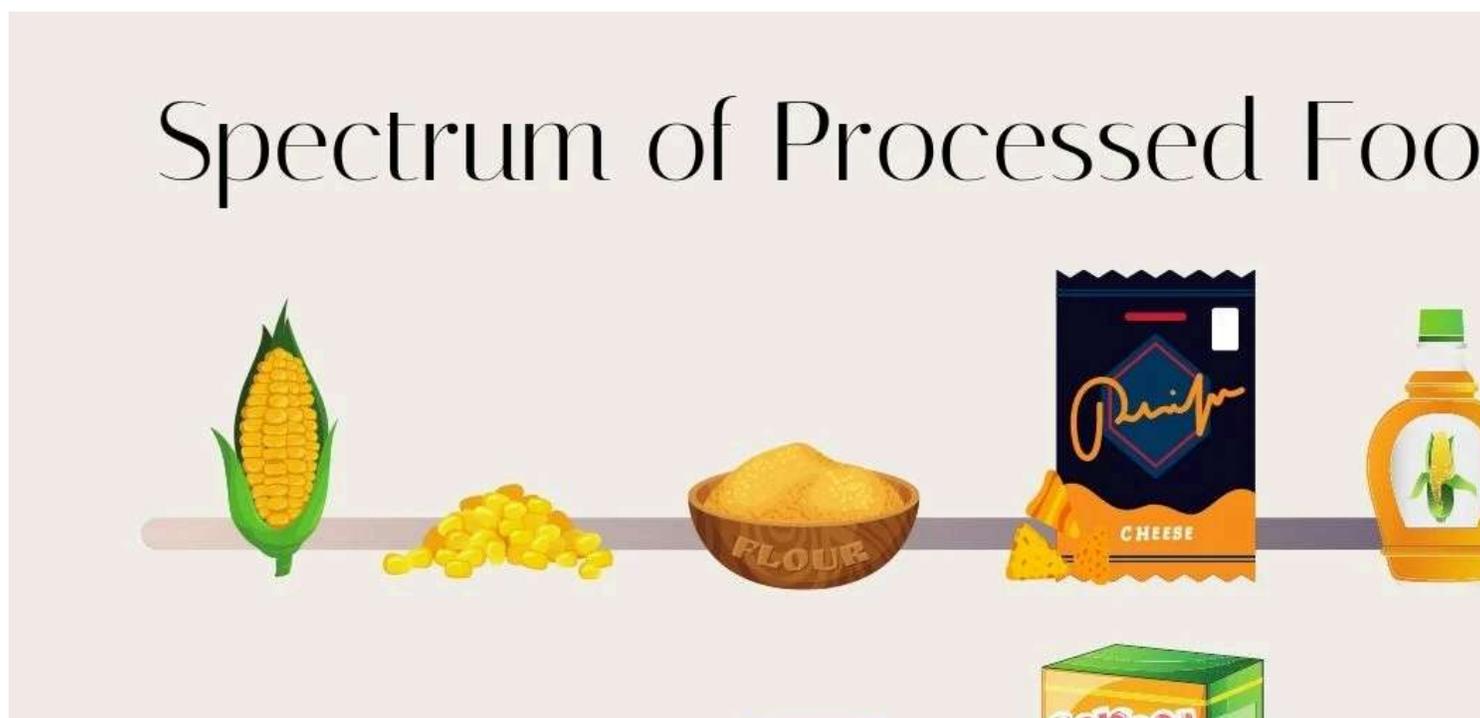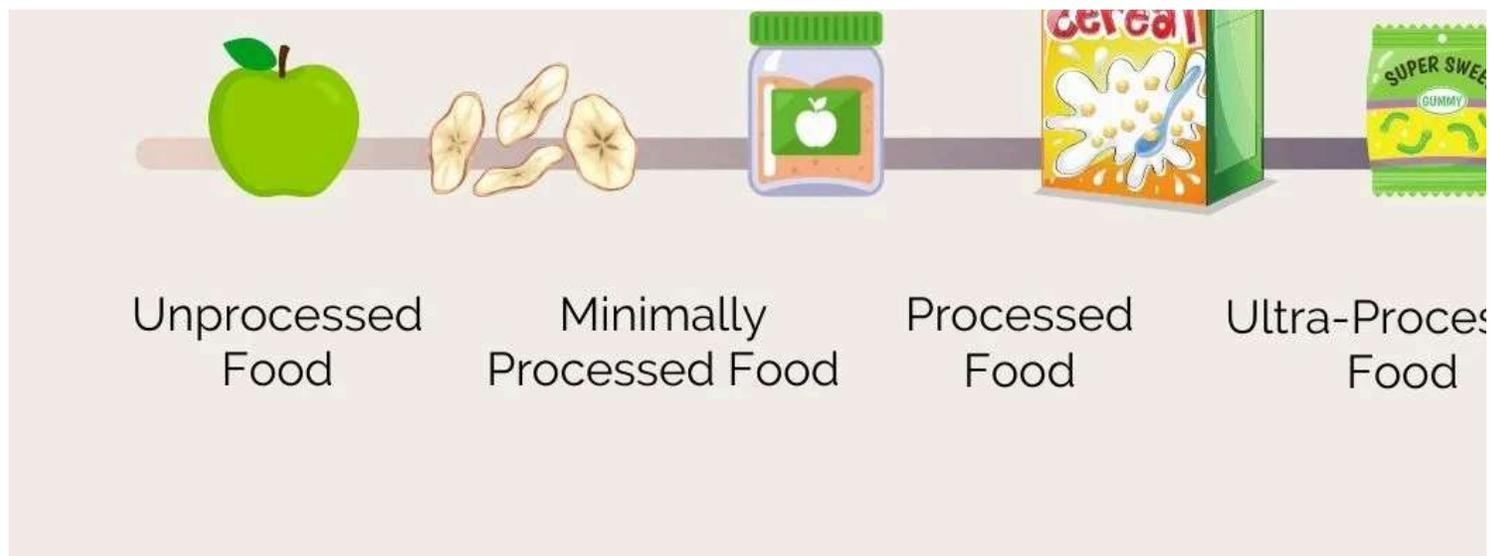
Consider the example of corn, the further along the processing spectrum you move,
ingredients are added, and the more processes are required to create the end produ
corn is considered unprocessed food, frozen corn is considered minimally processe
is considered minimally processed, cheesy corn chips are considered processed foc
fructose corn syrup is considered ultra-processed food.

IS ALL PROCESSED FOOD UNHEALTHY?

It's important to understand that **not all processed foods are unhealthy**. Minimally p
and moderately processed foods are often only slightly altered for the main purpose
preservation, which does not substantially change the nutrient content of the food a
great asset to a healthy diet. Opting for processed foods such as pre-cut and washe
vegetables, frozen fruit, canned beans, marinated meat, smoked fish, or pre-made h
great way to cut down on time in the kitchen and can help make building healthy an
meals much easier.

Examples of healthy processed foods include:

- Frozen fruits and vegetables
- Frozen meat and fish
- Canned meat and fish
- Smoked meat and fish
- Canned beans, lentils, and chickpeas
- Precut vegetables and bagged salads
- Pasta and noodles

- Nut and seed butter
- Stocks and broths
- Jarred salsa
- Jarred pasta sauce
- Jarred pesto
- Jarred soup
- Hummus
- Tofu
- Yogurt
- Cottage cheese

In fact, even certain brands of prepared meals and ready meals, such as soups and s
made with whole foods and contain little to no additives making them healthy proce

BENEFITS OF MINIMALLY PROCESSED FOODS

While unprocessed foods will always be considered the healthiest option, there are benefits to incorporating minimally and moderately processed foods into your diet.

More nutrient dense.

Minimally processed foods are more nutrient dense compared to ultra-processed fc are often referred to as empty-calorie foods.

More satiating.

Due to their higher density of micronutrients and macronutrients, namely protein and minimally processed foods have a greater impact on satiety levels and feelings of fu compared to processed foods (4, 5). For this reason, whole foods are considered mo foods than processed foods.

Save time.

Using minimally processed foods, such as canned beans, jarred pasta sauce, and fro vegetable blends can help to reduce prep time, cooking time, and clean up.

Increased dietary adherence.

Minimally processed foods are highly convenient and incorporating healthy prepared your diet can help to increase dietary adherence.

CONS OF ULTRA-PROCESSED FOODS

Although ultra-processed foods are commonly consumed in the standard North Am there are many drawbacks to them.

Fewer nutrients.

Ultra-processed foods, such as soda, candy, chips, and cakes, generally contain few per calorie compared to minimally processed foods.

Hyper-palatable.

The specific combinations of fat, sugar, sodium, and carbohydrates in ultra-processe
make them artificially rewarding, hyper-palatable foods that are harder to stop consu

More additives.

Ultra-processed foods typically contain more artificial flavors, artificial colors, and un
food additives.

More calories.

The increased content of fat and sugar in ultra-processed foods tends to make them
calories, which can lead to over-consumption of calories and, in the long run, potent
obesity, heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and other health concerns.

FAQS

Are eggs processed food?

Eggs have undergone little to no processing and are, therefore, considered unproce

What meat is unprocessed?

Fish, seafood, chicken, beef, pork, lamb, and other types of fresh and frozen meat are
considered unprocessed meats.

Is pasta considered processed food?

Pasta is considered a moderately processed food as it has been prepared and packa
to consumption and sometimes contains the addition of culinary ingredients, often ir
of salt, and added nutrients in the form of vitamins and minerals.

Is oatmeal considered processed food?

All forms of oats – steel cut, rolled, quick-cooking, and instant oats – are considered
minimally processed food, as they have undergone some processing but contain no
ingredients.

Is peanut butter considered ultra-processed food?

Natural peanut butter – made only of peanuts – is considered a minimally processed
while peanut butter with added oil, salt, or sugar is considered processed food.

Is processed food the same as junk food?

It is important to understand that not all processed food is junk food, however, all jun
processed. The term "junk food" is generally used to describe ultra-processed food.

HOW TO REDUCE CONSUMPTION OF PROCESSED F

Here are some tips to help reduce your consumption of ultra-processed foods:

1. **Cook your meals.** Prepare your own meals with unprocessed foods as much as p
   reach for fruits, vegetables, grains, beans, lentils, nuts, seeds, dairy, eggs, meat, p
   and seafood.
2. **Read labels.** When reaching for packaged foods, read food labels, specifically the
   list and nutrition facts label, and look for products made primarily of whole food v
   added sugar, sodium, and additives.
3. **Use minimally processed foods.** Incorporate minimally processed foods, such as
   beans, jarred tomato sauce, hummus, and bagged salads, for convenience and to
   dietary adherence.
4. **Limit, don't omit ultra-processed foods.** Remember, there is room for indulgence
   healthy diet and you don't need to eat "perfectly" to eat well. Enjoy ultra-processe
   from time-to-time, while prioritizing whole foods most of the time.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The term processed food refers to any food that has been altered from its natural sta
processing of food occurs on a spectrum from unprocessed to ultra-processed. Ultr
processed foods contain little to no nutritional value and are best limited in the diet,
they can still be enjoyed in moderation. It is best to consume a diet of primarily unpro
and minimally processed foods, use moderately processed foods for ease and conve

and enjoy ultra-processed foods occasionally.

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Comments

Sally Bird Clough

December 30, 2023 at 1:02 am

I am trying so hard to eat well, and cook at home. It's hard when you work and kids a
People throw a lot of terms around that I couldn't really make sense of. Processed fo
saturated fats were confusing until I read Stephanie's explanation. I love that you hav
portion of the website along with the recipes. I look forward to educating myself and
well!! Thank you.

REPLY →

Stephanie Kay

January 2, 2024 at 7:53 am

I'm so happy you found the information helpful, Sally! Thank you for sharing a
you continue to enjoy the articles and recipes. 🙂

REPLY →

Linda

November 6, 2024 at 4:02 am

The article has been an eye opener ,All this while I thought every food that is not writ
is unhealthy, but also I did not had any idea that some processed food are healthy fo
article is very educative

REPLY →

> ### Stephanie Kay
>
> *November 7, 2024 at 7:04 am*
>
> I'm so happy you found it helpful and informative, Linda. 🥲
>
> **REPLY →**

Hey, I'm Stephanie

– AKA RED –

I'm a nutritionist on a mission to change the way you look at food and teach you how to make real food work for real life in a realistic way.

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