Tips to Cut Back on Processed Foods

Processed foods are an easy choice when you’re on the go, but you should only eat them as an occasional treat. In this handout, you will learn what processed food is and how it affects the way you look and feel. You will also learn helpful tips to cut back on processed foods and add more whole foods into your diet.

WHAT ARE PROCESSED FOODS?
Processed foods are foods that have been taken out of their whole form. Processed foods usually come in bags, tins, wrappers or boxes.

Some examples include cookies, crackers, microwave or frozen meals, canned foods, deli meat or granola.

WHY ARE MANY PROCESSED FOODS BAD FOR ME?
Many processed foods have more calories, fat, sugar and salt than your body needs. All of that extra stuff can cause you to gain weight or feel sluggish and tired. Feeling tired and sluggish can hold you back from doing the things you love.

HEALTHIER CHOICES
Minimally-processed foods
Examples include cut up fruits and vegetables, dry-roasted nuts and bagged salad. Choose these foods more often if you eat processed foods.

Foods processed when they’re most ripe or ready to eat
Examples include canned tuna, canned beans and frozen fruits and vegetables. Choose these foods less often than whole foods.

Foods with added flavor or texture
Examples include salad dressing, cake mix and some yogurts. Choose these foods less often than whole foods.

Ready-to-eat foods
Examples include granola, deli meat and crackers. Choose these foods as an occasional treat.

Frozen or pre-made meals
Examples include microwave meals and frozen pizza. Choose these foods as an occasional treat.

LESS HEALTHY CHOICES
**HOW DO I KNOW IF A FOOD IS PROCESSED?**

- **Read the ingredient list.** If the ingredient list has lots of words you can’t pronounce or has lots of extra sugar and salt, it’s processed.

- **Count the ingredients.** If food has 5 or fewer whole ingredients, it’s a better choice.

- **Check the ingredients for whole grains as the first ingredient.** Whole grains are better for your body than other types of grains.

- **Check if the food is in its whole form.** For example, is the apple whole or mixed with other ingredients? Is the chicken fresh or frozen? Whole foods are a better choice than processed foods.

- **Swap out 1 processed meal or snack for a whole or healthier one.** For example, trade deli meat for fresh cooked meat in your sandwich. Top yogurt with dry-roasted nuts instead of granola. Have a piece of fruit instead of chips.

- **Pay attention to how you look and feel after you eat whole foods and processed foods.** Whole foods can help you look and feel better than processed foods. Processed foods can make you feel **bloated** (gassy), tired or grouchy. They can also make you gain weight.

- **Teach yourself to “unlike” processed foods.** If you swap out processed foods for healthier choices, over time, you will crave processed foods less. This might take a while, but you can cut back slowly, 1 snack or meal at a time.

---

**A note for your parents...**

It can be hard to limit how much processed food you and your family eats because processed food is everywhere. If you buy processed foods, look for foods with fewer ingredients. You should also look for ingredients that you can pronounce, like whole grains, fruit and vegetables.

**One of the most important things you can do is to set a good example for your teen.** If he/she sees that you’re eating fewer processed foods, he/she will have a higher chance of also eating fewer processed foods.