

Prevention c+olumn

PROCESSED FOODS – AUGUST 2019

Processed foods: How much is too much?

Processed foods make up about **a third of our grocery store purchases**. However, the new Canada's Food Guide and a number of experts recommend that we **limit consumption** of highly processed foods. Why? And what do they mean by “processed?”

The most commonly purchased ultra-processed food items:¹

1. Sugary drinks
2. Pure fruit juice
3. Bread
4. Prepared meals
5. Flavoured yogourt

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“Modern” eating habits



The eating habits of Canadians have changed a lot in recent decades, compared to those of previous generations. Not only do food industry products dominate supermarket aisles, but there are loads of fast food restaurants and vending machines everywhere, and almost all shops have bakery display cases. So it's not surprising that practically **50% of the average calorie intake of Canadians comes from “ultra-processed foods.”**

The goal of the food industry, when doing the cooking for us, is to prepare foods that are **safe** and **appetizing**, while generating **profits**. Unfortunately, the product's nutritional value is often sacrificed. **Various nutrients are lost during processing** in most cases. The frequent addition of **sugar, sodium, saturated fats or various additives** may make processed foods appealing to taste buds and give them a longer shelf life but negatively affect their nutritional profile and our health. ■

The risks

In most industrialized countries where there is an abundance of processed foods, **chronic illnesses are on the rise.**

HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE AND HEART DISEASE

Ultra-processed foods are the primary source of **sodium** intake in the Canadian diet. A diet high in sodium may cause high blood pressure, followed by other heart diseases. A lot of ultra-processed foods also contain **saturated fat**, which is also associated with a greater risk of developing heart disease.

OBESITY AND DIABETES

Sugary drinks and **foods with added sugar** increase a person's risk of developing a weight problem, diabetes or both.

CANCER

Processed meats (sausages, deli meat, ham...) are high in **sodium** and **saturated fat**. They also contain **additives**, which may have a carcinogenic effect if consumed in large quantities. Regularly consuming large amounts of processed meat is associated with a higher risk of colorectal cancer. ■

How to know if it's processed

In 2009, a group of researchers proposed a new food classification system, known as the **NOVA food classification system**. This system, which has become a reference for health and nutrition in many countries, does not consider the nutritional quality of foods. It classifies foods into **4 groups** based on the **extent of food processing**. According to the most recent studies based on this model, it would be beneficial to our health if we consumed foods from the first 2 groups and did the processing, i.e. the food preparation, ourselves!

NOVA classification

1. UNPROCESSED OR MINIMALLY PROCESSED FOODS

These foods can be referred to as “fresh” or “whole,” and come from plants or animals. Some of them may have undergone minimal processing that does not significantly alter their nutritional properties.

- Fresh, refrigerated, frozen or dried fruits and vegetables
- Fresh meats, fish and seafood
- Eggs
- Pasteurized milk
- Plain yogourt
- Coffee and tea
- Herbs and spices
- Nuts and seeds

2. CULINARY INGREDIENTS

These substances, which are obtained from various physical and chemical processes, are rarely consumed by themselves. They are mainly used to prepare, season and cook foods in the first group.

- Sugar, honey and maple syrup
- Vegetable oils
- Butter and animal fats
- Vinegar
- Flours and starches
- Leavening agents (yeast, baking powder...)

3. PROCESSED FOODS

These foods are usually made up of one or two foods in the first group and have undergone fairly limited processing (involving the ingredients in the second group) to enhance their flavour and prolong their shelf life.

- Canned foods
- Smoked foods
- Cheeses
- Tofu
- Simple breads
- Beer, wine and cider

4. ULTRA-PROCESSED FOODS

These foods often contain ingredients only available to the food industry (additives, flavours, syrups and concentrates, etc.). They generally contain a lot of sugar, sodium or added saturated fat.

- Certain breakfast cereals and some flavoured oatmeals
- Certain mass-produced breads, crackers, chips, salty snacks
- Cookies, soft granola bars, chocolate bars, cakes, candies... ■

You can eat better

While it may seem unrealistic to completely eliminate all processed foods, reducing your consumption is key. It will mean rethinking your grocery list, and getting busy in the kitchen, but you can do it! Here are a few pointers:

DINE IN

Limit fast food restaurants as much as possible. Although the occasional processed food doesn't harm, restaurants, convenience stores, and vending machines can be tricky. Stopping for a quick bite, or even just coffee, can lead to the purchase of additional processed items, or to an order less balanced than originally planned. Dining at more gourmet restaurants can always be enjoyable. The goal is not to eliminate the fun of eating out, simply to create better daily habits. It will allow for a better health and higher satisfaction when you do eat out.

DRINK WATER

Sugary drinks and juices are the most commonly purchased ultra-processed food items. They are high in sugar, contain few other nutrients and are consumed too quickly. The ideal health (and budget) solution is to have a portable reusable bottle that you can simply fill with water or include sparkling water to your days.

GET COOKING

There's no getting around it, if you want to reduce your consumption of processed foods! Unfortunately, many people feel they lack the necessary skill to prepare meals (or consider themselves totally incompetent in the kitchen). Like anything, cooking is a learned skill... Practice makes perfect! Here are a few mealtime DIY tips:

- Set aside time in your schedule for cooking.
- Plan your meals for the week ahead, and shop accordingly.
- Play music you like, make sure you have enough room to work and the tools you will need, and create a space where you will enjoy working.
- Start with simple recipes.
- Search the Internet. You'll find thousands of recipes and even videos explaining the basic techniques.
- Something didn't work out? Don't be discouraged. It happens to everyone!
- Have fun cooking with friends. Get the kids involved as early as possible, so that they can start acquiring some skills... and lend a hand!
- Choose an ultra-processed food item that you purchase regularly, and try to prepare it yourself. ■

MAKE **better choices** AT THE GROCERY STORE

Watch out for the bright packaging, health claims or logos, and pictures of cartoon characters. They are all marketing strategies designed to grab the attention of consumers. An ultra-processed food item that's a great source of a certain nutrient may be high in saturated fat, sugar or sodium. It is better to use the nutrition facts on the package to consider the product in its entirety.

- **Short, logical and understandable list of ingredients:**
The more a food item contains unknown ingredients (e.g., glucose-fructose syrup, milk solids, protein isolate...), the better it is to avoid that product.
- The **percent daily value (% DV)** in the nutrition facts table for **saturated fat, sodium and sugar**.
 - < 5% = is a little
 - > 15% = is a lot

False savings

All packaged or processed food items are not necessarily bad for your health. Some may be made from quality ingredients and become good substitutes in home cooking, but quality generally costs more! Be wary of processed foods that are sold at a very low price, as they are rarely nutritious. You're not really getting a bargain! That said, a high price is not a guarantee of quality, either. ■



In conclusion

Processed foods are gaining popularity. Although they may be attractive, many experts recommend avoiding them, because they apparently increase the risk of developing chronic illnesses. A healthy, balanced diet should be primarily made up of fresh foods, with basic ingredients that you prepare yourself. ■

1. Plamondon L, Durette G et Paquette M-C (2019). L'achat d'aliments ultra-transformés en supermarchés et magasins à grande surface au Québec. Institut national de santé publique du Québec. 126 p. www.inspq.qc.ca/publications/2487