

[IMAGE]

5 Steps to Avoid Processed Foods (When You're Surrounded by Them)

By Editorial Staff

Processed foods is an enormous buzzword, both because increasing evidence implicates processed foods in a variety of negative health outcomes; and also because we are continually faced with them at every turn, despite this increasing evidence of their harm. In a nutshell, we keep learning how dangerous they are; processed food manufacturers continue producing and promoting them; and the majority of us keep eating them.

Something has to give. So far, it's been our health. Let's take a different approach, since the current approach doesn't seem to be working. Here are five ways to avoid processed foods – even when we're surrounded by them at every twist and turn.

Step #1: Clean Out Your Pantry (and Fridge / Freezer). Avoidance always begins with cleansing – getting rid of the things you need to avoid. If they're in the home, they're too close to you. If white flour is the first ingredient, why are you eating it? If it contains added sugar (especially if it's a food that shouldn't require any), why are you eating it? If it contains large amounts of sugar (and little else) – soda, candy, etc. – why are you eating it consistently? If it's "ready to eat," even though it clearly involved a process to get to that stage, why are you eating it? These are the primary culprits, but there are many more, and they're likely lurking in your cupboard, fridge and freezer. Find them and get rid of them. The financial cost you assume will be more than compensated by your health savings.

Step #2: Learn to Read Labels. Now that you've got a clean house, how do you avoid replacing the items you've tossed with more of the same? Learn to read labels and understand what *processed* means. We've already talked about white flour, for example; but do you know "enriched wheat flour" isn't really any better? "Whole grains" is what you're really looking for, and it has to one of the first few ingredients. And what about sugar? You'll be amazed at how many foods contains high-fructose corn syrup; sometimes as the first ingredient (check out your favorite BBQ sauce). When you think about what's processed and what's not, don't just think about ingredients; also consider what it took to get that food to your table. If it went

through an extensive manufacturing *process*... (See Step #3)

supermarket - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark *Step #3: Avoid Boxes and Bags.* With a few exceptions, foods that come in a box or a bag have been processed in some fashion. They've certainly been on a journey that's taken them far away from the original food and deep into the processed world. Consider something as innocent as a whole-wheat cracker, for example. *Whole wheat; should be good for me.* Not so fast. How much fiber has been stripped out? How much oil and sugar has been added? Do they look anything like "whole wheat" anymore (color, texture, etc.)? What about frozen meals? We're betting the spaghetti and meatballs you're drooling over isn't the same spaghetti and meatballs you could make at home; not by a long shot.

Step #4: Use Your Dinner Table More. Fast-food restaurants are notorious providers of all things processed. *Burgers, fries and shakes, oh my!* All loaded with empty carbs, fat, sugar and sodium; and just as important, *missing* the key nutrients your body needs. Not to mention the process that brought the foods from a warehouse in one part of the country to your local fast-food joint. So use your dinner table more (and your dinner-making skills). The only "process" in the meal you make from scratch will be the process you use to create it!

Step #5: Make Your Grocery Store Smaller. Even the biggest grocery store only has a few areas that should interest you if you're truly dedicated to avoiding processed foods. *First stop:* the produce section – whole, raw foods in their unprocessed form, chock full of vitamins and minerals. *Next stop:* the meat / fish department for lean, antibiotic- and hormone-free chicken or turkey ,and omega-3-rich fish with healthy fats (salmon, etc.). If you're a vegetarian / vegan, head to the grocery aisle that stocks alternate protein sources such as beans, lentils, nuts, etc. (also good options even if you're a meat / fish eater). The only other aisles that should be on your trip: *the dairy aisle* (at least for low-sugar yogurt with probiotics and some type of milk - cow's, almond, soy, etc.) to help ensure adequate daily calcium intake; *the cereal aisle* (not for most cereals, which are high-sugar and low-nutrition, but definitely for raw oatmeal); and back to the bean aisle, which is often where you'll also find rice (the whole-grain variety). Those are your staple aisles. Everything else is generally processed-food-packed, waiting to tempt you.

No discussion of processed foods would be complete without pointing out the difference between minimally processed foods and the foods we're talking about here. Even bagged spinach has been minimally processed for convenience, if you think about it. Bagged spinach is not the problem, although if you can, choose a

bunch of fresh spinach instead. Ready-to-eat foods are the most processed – microwavable meals, anyone?

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