

# Family Friendly Factsheet

## Processed Foods



### What are processed foods?

Processed foods are usually thought of as 'bad' foods but in fact, the term food processing covers each step taken to change raw ingredients into a finished product. Foods such as pasteurised milk, canned pulses, pre cut fruit and frozen vegetables are therefore processed foods although they are known to be beneficial for health. However, some processing techniques can increase the amount of fat, sugar and salt and even add potentially harmful chemicals to food.

### How is food processing related to health?

There are many different techniques applied to foods before they reach supermarket shelves, some of which have more of an impact than others. Generally, those which apply high levels of heat, light or oxygen to foods cause the greatest loss of nutrients. Some processes involve the addition of substances which are not considered to be advantageous to health. However, some processes are invaluable for allowing consumption of certain foods throughout the year and making the use of various foods more convenient.

### Can 'processed' foods be healthy?

Below are some common processing techniques and information about their impact on our health...

#### Canned foods

Canned foods such as fruits, vegetables and fish are very valuable sources of vitamins, minerals and, in the case of fish, protein and omega 3 oils. Canned pulses are also good sources of protein and nutrients and make the use of pulses which require overnight soaking much more convenient. However, the amount of salt and sugar in canned foods should be taken into consideration. Where possible choose foods canned in water or juice or rinse foods which have been stored in brine or syrup.

#### Frozen foods

The freezing process can be applied to many different types of food including meat, fish, fruits, vegetables and bread. Most foods are frozen rapidly at extremely cold temperatures to form small ice crystals. The smaller the size of crystals formed, the less damage caused to the food. This means that most frozen foods are very similar in quality to fresh foods, in addition, when foods are frozen, the natural processes which both deplete the levels of nutrients in food and cause food spoilage are stopped. This means that food remains fresher for longer and some frozen foods can actually contain higher levels of vitamins and minerals than fresh foods which have been picked and stored.

#### Processed meat

Recent research has found that eating excessive amounts of processed ham and other smoked, salted or cured meats could increase the risk of bowel cancer later in life. As well as containing relatively high levels of saturated fat, the chemicals added to meat during the processes of curing, salting or preservation introduce potentially carcinogenic substances to the food. Current advice is that processed meats such as ham can be given to children, but should only be given occasionally.

#### Should I eat processed foods?

We all know that we should eat less saturated fat, sugar and salt, some processed foods can help us to do this! The best way to monitor intake of these nutrients is to read the label. The traffic lights system is now used on most foods, but below is a table which may come in useful!

Nutrient	Low level	High level
Saturated fat	Less than 1.5g/100g	More than 5g/100g
Sugar	Less than 5g/100g	More than 15g/100g
Salt	Less than 0.3g/100g	More than 1.5g/100g