



FACT SHEET

PROCESSED FOODS

* Processed foods are usually defined as foods which have been changed to a more edible form by a series of operations carried out in a large factory. These operations also preserve and extend the shelf life of the foods. Fresh foods on the other hand are those foods grown, picked and eaten with minimal change and consequently they have a short shelf life. Any changes to fresh food are made in the domestic kitchen rather than in a large factory.

* Most foods with the exception of some fruits and vegetables need some processing before they can be eaten. This processing may involve peeling, cutting, grinding or cooking. In the past most processing was done in the home (making jams, bottling fruits, pickling vegetables, baking bread) while today most is done in a large factory.

* Processed foods are often seen as inferior to "fresh" while at the same time many foods perceived to be "fresh" are in fact processed eg milk, fruit juice, fish, meat, poultry, grains

Why do we process foods?

- Gives a greater variety of food year round and with consistent quality without worrying about seasonality
- Makes food more appealing and appetising by improving texture and taste
- Lengthens the shelf life by stopping or slowing contamination by bacteria, yeasts or moulds.
- Makes food more digestible and more nutritious by making nutrients more available eg destruction of trypsin inhibitor in legumes and liberation of bound niacin in cereals
- Gets rid of harmful constituents in foods eg kidney beans
- Makes foods safer to eat eg pasteurisation of milk
- Enables the production of foods with a specific nutritional profile or improves the nutrient profile of a food eg infant formula, fortification with vitamins and minerals.
- Saves time in food preparation at home

Types of Processing

* Pasteurisation, sterilising, blanching, chilling, smoking, drying, canning, milling, freezing, freeze drying, chemical processing (pickling with salt, addition of additives to slow bacterial growth), irradiation (only allowed if specific permission given by Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ), Standard 1.5.3 Food Standards Code)

* Heinz baby foods in cans and jars are prepared in much the same way as home cooked foods using fresh ingredients but on a much bigger scale. They are made to very strict ingredient and safety standards to maximize nutrition with no added salt, sugar, artificial colours, flavours or preservatives. The steam injection or "peak nutrition process" of cooking ensures the food is cooked quickly at high temperature so flavour, colour and nutritional loss is kept to a minimum.

Nutritional value

Whether a food is prepared and processed in the home kitchen, restaurant or factory there will be some loss of nutrients. Nutrient losses can occur during harvesting, transport, storage or preparation. Losses from processing vary according to type of food, length of time that processing takes and particular nutrients. Nutritional studies have shown that there is very little nutritional difference between fresh, canned and frozen fruits and vegetables and that canned prepared meals make a significant contribution to recommended nutrient intakes of young children, children and adults. Most nutrient losses from processed foods have been found to occur during preparation in home or restaurant.

To maximise the nutritional value of processed foods

- Take frozen foods home in an insulated container and freeze immediately
- Store foods at the lowest suitable temperature for the shortest time



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- Take notice of use by dates and best before dates
- Minimise cutting and chopping of vegetables and fruits
- Don't use bicarbonate of soda in cooking as it destroys vitamin C
- Use a minimum amount of water when cooking vegetables
- Follow recommended heating or cooking directions – don't overcook
- Serve food immediately after preparation

Processed infant foods and Nutrition

* The composition (including nutritional profile) and labelling of commercial infant foods is regulated by FSANZ Food Standards Code 2.9.2 *Infant Foods*. This Standard has been prepared taking into account the particular needs of infants in regard to the texture of the food, digestion capabilities, renal capacity and the need for high energy and nutrient intakes to support rapid growth. It also recognises the particular microbiological and immunological susceptibility of infants, including the potential for the development of food allergies, so that certain ingredients are not permitted. For example, honey is not permitted in infant foods unless it is sterilised because it may contain *Clostridium botulinum* spores capable of causing food poisoning. Infant foods are restricted in the amounts of sugar and sodium that are permitted and infant cereals must be fortified with iron and other nutrients to recommended levels.

* Commercial infant foods have the advantage of offering infants a large variety of nutritious foods with differing tastes and textures while saving a busy mother time in food preparation. For the mother with little or no cooking skills, where cooking facilities are limited or not available and hygiene questionable, use of commercial infant foods provides reassurance that the infant will be consuming safe and nutritious foods.

* Dietary Guidelines for Children and Adolescents suggest eating a wide variety of foods which includes fresh and processed foods.

References

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