

Healthy Living

What to know about processed foods

Anyone looking to eat right undoubtedly knows there's no shortage of advice in relation to dietary habits. Fad diets and nutritional trends are shared on social media platforms and websites every day. While access to such information is more available than ever, the volume of data can be overwhelming, especially for people looking to make simple and healthy tweaks.

One trending topic among advocates for improved nutrition concerns processed foods. Various health concerns, from the obesity epidemic to increased rates of high blood pressure, have been traced to processed foods. Such associations merit consideration, and that begins with answering some common questions surrounding processed foods.

What are processed foods?

The United States Department of Agriculture defines processed foods as any raw agricultural commodity that has been altered from its original state. Such alterations occur when foods are subjected to various processes, including pasteurization, blanching, freezing, dehydrating, or fermenting, among

others. Fortification is another means to processing foods.

Is processing always unhealthy?

Processing food is not always bad for human beings. For example, milk is pasteurized and commercial milk products are fortified with vitamin D. In regard to fortified milk, adding vitamin D ensures milk drinkers receive sufficient amounts of a nutrient that helps strengthen bones.

So why the fear of processed foods?

The negative characterizations of processed foods arises mainly from foods that are considered ultra-processed. The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics uses a spectrum to differentiate between various types of processed foods. Minimally processed foods include washed fresh spinach, while heavily processed foods include ready-to-eat foods like cereal and crackers. The negative attributes often associated with processed foods typically refers to heavily processed foods, which may also be referred to as ultra-processed foods.

What are some examples of minimally processed and ultra-processed foods?

Potatoes are perhaps the simplest example of how a single food

item can sometimes be healthy and other times lack nutrition, even though it's the same item. A baked potato is minimally processed because it's been altered from its original state after being washed and baked. But the nutritional profile remains largely the same after these minimal adjustments to the potato.

Probiotics may provide a healthy boost

It's easy to view bacteria and yeasts through a particular lens, without realizing that these microorganisms serve various functions. Certainly, bacteria can lead to infections, but certain bacteria also are important for maintaining health.

Probiotics are live microorganisms (mostly bacteria and some yeasts) that may offer various health benefits. Probiotics are sometimes referred to as "good" or "beneficial" microbes due to their role in balancing the gut ecosystem. The Mayo Clinic reports that research suggests probiotics may be helpful, but it hasn't yet been proven that probiotics improve health and are safe for everyone. While side effects from probiotic supplements seem to be rare, it's best to consult a physician before taking such products.

French fries are made from potatoes, but they're often greatly altered from their original state after being fried in oil. French fries also tend to be heavily salted, furthering altering them from their original state and thus lowering their nutritional profile.

What can I do to avoid eating heavily processed foods?

What are some common probiotics?

The National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health says the most common probiotics are bacteria that belong to groups called Lactobacillus and Bifidobacterium. Others are yeasts such as Saccharomyces boulardii. Probiotics are found in various foods, including fermented dairy products like yogurt, kefir and cheese as well as other fermented foods, including sauerkraut, kimchi, pickles, tempeh, miso, sourdough, salami, olives, and kombucha. Additional forms of probiotics include probiotic capsules and powders.

What are prebiotics?

The terms prebiotics and probiotics cannot be used interchangeably. Harvard Health says prebiotics are ingredients in certain foods that

The Mayo Clinic Health System advises reading food labels to analyze items in relation to how processed they may or may not be. Foods that contain additives and preservatives like high fructose corn syrup, hydrogenated oils, food dyes, sodium nitrates, sodium nitrites, monosodium glutamate (MSG),

and sulfites are best avoided or consumed in low amounts.

The debate around processed foods is complicated. People seeking to bolster the nutritional profile of their diets are urged to avoid ultra-processed foods and work with a physician or dietitian to ensure they're making healthy choices.

the intestines cannot fully digest. One can think of prebiotics as the food upon which probiotics feed. Prebiotics also may trigger the growth of good microbes in the digestive tract.

Potential probiotic benefits

Probiotics may benefit health through several mechanisms. They may restore gut microbe balance after a poor diet, illness or antibiotic use. Probiotics can help crowd out harmful pathogens in the gut. They may reduce "leaky gut" by supporting gut barrier integrity. Probiotics also may calm inflammation and help boost the immune system.

Additional uses for probiotics

Probiotics are largely known for their use in the digestive tract, but probiotics also come in topical versions or suppositories to target specific areas. Harvard Health says vaginal probiotic supplements are hugely popular and are designed to promote beneficial bacteria. Some common gynecological conditions are thought to be caused by an imbalance

of bacteria inside the vagina. However, as of now, the benefits of suppositories like these are unknown and should be discussed with a gynecologist before use.

Topical probiotics have demonstrated beneficial effects for the treatment of certain inflammatory conditions like acne, rosacea, psoriasis, and others, says the National Institute of Health. But again, caution should be heeded and any new products should be discussed with a doctor.

Probiotics are an all-natural alternative that many people consider when seeking to improve personal health. It's important to speak with health care providers about the efficacy of probiotics and whether they are safe and effective for particular needs.

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