

Healthy Eating: Improving Your Convenience Foods¹

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What Are Convenience Foods?

Convenience foods are foods that require little preparation. Some convenience foods only require heating and are ready to eat in less than five minutes! The majority of convenience foods are processed foods. However, pre-cut, pre-washed, frozen, and canned fruits and vegetables also can be classified as convenience foods. They are healthy foods but are usually more expensive than less prepared fresh fruits and vegetables.

Pros and Cons of Convenience Foods

Convenience foods offer many advantages, including less time spent planning meals, grocery shopping, and preparing food, as well as fewer leftovers (with single-portion foods) and easier cleanup. Convenience foods also can provide options for those who do not like to cook, have limited cooking skills or ability, or have poor or no kitchen facilities.

On the other hand, processed convenience foods generally have a low nutritional quality compared to other foods. This is because processed convenience foods are low in essential nutrients and high in sodium, fat, or added sugars.

Improving Nutritional Quality

The good news is that you can make the convenience foods you prepare at home healthier by adding nutrient-rich

vegetables, fruits, legumes, or lean meat. These healthy additions will increase the fiber, protein, vitamin, and mineral content of the meal and reduce the sodium, fat, and added sugar in each serving.



Figure 1. When using canned beans, put the beans into a colander and rinse with cold water before using.

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Common Convenience Foods and Easy Additions

The table below lists common convenience foods and suggestions of foods you can add to them to improve their nutritional quality.

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Table 1.

Common Convenience Foods	Possible Additions
Prepackaged noodles and rice mixes	Fresh, frozen, or canned* vegetables; lean cuts of meat
Canned soup	Fresh, frozen, or canned* vegetables
Baked potato	Low-fat cottage cheese or plain yogurt
Prepackaged casserole mix	Lean beef, chicken, or turkey; fresh, frozen, or canned* vegetables
Frozen cheese pizza	Fresh or frozen chopped vegetables; lean meats, such as low-sodium turkey pepperoni or Canadian bacon
Jell-O, pudding, or yogurt	Fresh, canned,** or frozen fruit chunks
*Use no sodium added or low sodium	
**Use fruits canned in juice; drain juice	

Additional Tips

Some convenience foods call for the addition of milk, butter, or salt during preparation. However, these additions add extra calories and fat to your meals. When the directions say to add milk, use low-fat or fat-free milk, which contains the same amount of nutrients as whole or 2% milk but has less fat and fewer calories.

If the directions say to add butter or margarine, cut the amount in half or do not add any. Doing so will cut down on the amount of fat in your meal.

Instead of adding salt, use other herbs and spices to add flavor and zest to your food.

What about your favorite prepackaged muffin or brownie mix? Instead of adding vegetable oil, use unsweetened apple sauce. You will still get the moist texture you love but with less fat and more nutrients!



Figure 3. Reduce salt in recipes and add extra flavor with herbs and spices.

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Figure 2. Select vegetables frozen without sauces or added salt to avoid excess fat, calories, and sodium.

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