



## **It's not whether a food is processed that matters, but how it's processed and what's in it.**

You often hear: "If it's processed, it must be unhealthy!" It's an easy idea to believe, especially when "processed" is used as a negative label in the media but, in reality, almost all the food we eat is processed in some way, and that's not automatically a bad thing.

Food processing has been part of human life for thousands of years, long before factories existed. Often, the goal has been to make food safer, last longer, and, in some cases, more nutritious. Simply put, processed food is any food that has been changed from its natural state. This could be chopping vegetables, freezing fish shortly after it's caught, pasteurising milk to remove harmful bacteria or baking bread from flour. Processing can be done in homes, in restaurants, and factories alike.

Processing exists on a wide spectrum. Pasteurisation, canning, and freezing help prevent harmful bacteria from growing and reduce the risk of foodborne illness. Vegetables frozen soon after harvest keep most of their vitamins and minerals. Cooking tomatoes increases the availability of lycopene (a carotenoid), a highly beneficial plant compound. Fortifying flour with folic acid or salt with iodine has helped prevent nutrient deficiencies in entire populations. On the other hand, some methods can reduce nutritional quality: refining grains removes fibre, vitamins and minerals unless they are added back. Using high heat can lower the levels of certain heat-sensitive vitamins, such as vitamin C, and adding large amounts of sugar, salt or unhealthy fats can make foods less healthy overall.

That's why it's important to consider both *how* the food is processed and its overall nutritional profile. "Processed" does not automatically mean "unhealthy." A healthy diet can include a mix of fresh, frozen, canned, and dried foods, variety helps ensure you get a broad range of nutrients. Check the label for added salt, sugar, and fat, and choose options with lower amounts. There's no need to avoid wholegrain bread, canned beans, plain yoghurt, frozen berries, or other nutritious processed options just because they've been labelled "processed."

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