

Healthy Eating: Improving Your Convenience Foods¹

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What Are Convenience Foods?

Convenience foods are foods that require little preparation. With some convenience foods, you only have to heat them, and they are ready to eat in less than five minutes!

The majority of convenience foods are processed foods. However, precut, prewashed, frozen, and canned fruits and vegetables also can be classified as convenience foods. They are healthy foods but usually more expensive than less prepared fresh fruits and vegetables.

Pros and Cons of Convenience Foods

Convenience foods offer many benefits, including less time spent planning meals and grocery shopping, less preparation time, fewer leftovers (with single-portion foods), and easier cleanup. Convenience foods also can provide options for those who don't 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 of the sodium, fat, and/or added sugars they contain, along with low amounts of essential nutrients.



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

Credits: Paul Goyette, <http://bit.ly/GDgK62>

Improving Nutritional Quality

The good news is that you can improve the nutritional quality of convenience foods you prepare at home by adding nutrient-rich foods, such as vegetables, fruit, and/or meat and meat alternatives! Adding nutritious components to convenience foods will allow you to consume a greater amount of the essential nutrients, such as the fiber, protein, vitamins, and minerals that your body needs to maintain a healthful status and reduce your risk of chronic diseases. In addition, adding these nutritious foods reduces the amount of sodium, fat, and/or sugar per serving.

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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.

Additional Tips

Some convenience foods call for the addition of milk, butter, and/or salt during preparation. However, they 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 don't 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 2. Select vegetables frozen without sauces or added salt to avoid excess fat, calories, and sodium.

Credits: leibolmai, <http://bit.ly/GEiUiz>



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

Credits: Brandon Burke, <http://bit.ly/GESmti>

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	