

Study Says Highly Processed Foods are Less Nutritious

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Processed foods—defined as any foods other than raw agricultural commodities and categorized by the extent of changes occurring in foods as a result of processing—have been on consumers’ hit list for years. What’s interesting is the majority of calories consumed by U.S. households may come from processed foods, according to a study published in *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* (May 6, 2015).

But before I dive into the ins and outs of this new study, let me say this: Processed foods come in all shapes and sizes, and despite what consumers think, processed doesn't mean unhealthy. There are many processed foods that are not only low in saturated fat, sugar, sodium and calories, but they feature healthy fats and oils, reduced sodium, fiber, protein and much more. Cleaner labels and on-front packaging claims such as “minimally processed” are also helping to eliminate some of the stigma attached to processed foods, as well the current trend to boost nutrition in products that, perhaps, have been viewed as unhealthy such as frozen meals.

The researchers set out to determine trends in the contribution of processed and convenience food categories to purchases by U.S. households, and to compare saturated fat, sugar and sodium content of purchases across levels of processing and convenience. So they analyzed purchases of consumer packaged goods for 157,142 households from the 2000 to 2012 Homescan Panel. They explicitly defined categories for classifying products by degree of industrial processing and separately by convenience of preparation. They classified more than 1.2 million products through use of barcode-specific descriptions and ingredient lists.

Here's what they found: More than three-fourths of energy in purchases by U.S. households came from moderately (15.9 percent) and highly processed (61 percent) foods and beverages in 2012 (939 kcal/d per capita). Trends between 2000 and 2012 were stable. When classifying foods by convenience, ready-to-eat (68.1 percent) and ready-to-heat (15.2 percent) products supplied the majority of energy in purchases. In addition, they found 60.4 percent of the highly processed foods were found to contain more than 10 percent kcal from saturated fat, 15 percent kcal from sugar and 2,400 mg of sodium/1,000 kcal, whereas only 5.6 percent of less-processed foods and 4.9 percent of foods requiring cooking/preparation fell into this category.

Given their findings, the researchers concluded "highly-processed food purchases are a dominant, unshifting part of U.S. purchasing patterns yet may have higher saturated fat, sugar and sodium content compared with less-processed foods. Wide variation in nutrient content suggests food choices within categories may be important."