

PROCESSED AND READY TO EAT FOODS

Urbanization has increased the intake and demand for processed foods. There is a trend towards replacing traditionally cooked foods with processed foods. Processed foods may not be nutritionally balanced unless fortified. Sugar, a processed food, provides empty calories.

Ques. - What are processed foods?

Ans. Foods that are subjected to technological modifications either for preservation or for converting into ready-to-use/eat foods, eliminating laborious household procedures, are called “**processed foods**”.

Some of the **examples** are ready mixes, dehydrated foods, pasta products, canned foods, confectioneries, bakery, dairy products and breakfast foods.

Manufacture of processed foods requires technology application and machinery, and as a result, processed foods are relatively expensive.

Ques. – Why is there an increased demand of processed foods?

Ans. There is an increased demand for processed, ready-to-eat and convenience foods due to changes in lifestyle. As more and more women go to work outside, and families become nuclear, consumption of processed foods, particularly in urban areas, is on the increase.

Today's consumer is looking for convenient, easy-to cook, and ready-to-eat foods which require less time to prepare than traditional home-cooked foods. Food processing is must to preserve highly perishable products like milk, meat, fish and fresh fruits and vegetables. Food processing increases the seasonal availability of foods and enables easy transportation and distribution over long distances.

Ques. - Do processed foods contribute to nutrient intake?

Ans. Processed foods are generally consumed either as part of a meal, or as a snack item. Their contribution in terms of essential nutrients depends on the type of processing and fortification, the frequency of use, and the quantity consumed.

Processed foods are generally refined and a majority of them are rich in fat or in salt/sugar, and are calorie dense. They lack dietary fibre and micronutrients. Thus, caution needs to be exercised when processed foods constitute a major part of the meal.

Breakfast cereals are increasingly being used in urban areas. Traditional breakfast items like *idli, dosa, upma, roti, Idly, Wada, Dosa* are richer sources of nutrients. Puffed and parched rice products (eg. flaked rice) besides being crisp and tasty, are easily digestible.

On the other hand, food items like chips, candies, peppermints, chocolates, etc., which are popular among children, are considered as unhealthy since they provide only empty calories often containing artificial colours and other additives. Their use should be discouraged.

Ques. - What is the difference between instant foods, fast foods, street foods and unhealthy (junk) foods?

Instant foods Instant foods are those, which undergo special processing designed to dissolve or to disperse particles more rapidly in a liquid than the untreated product. For instance, instant noodles, soup powders, cornflakes fall under this category.

Although all instant foods need not be unhealthy in terms of high calorie or salt contents, there are concerns about certain additives like monosodium glutamate, which may also add up to the over-all sodium intake from the foods. Monosodium glutamate may be used instead of salt as the sodium content is lower than in ordinary salt.

Fast Foods Fast foods are foods already made or cooked to order within minutes for consumption – noodles, burgers, fried fish, milk shakes, chips, salads, pizzas, sandwiches, etc. Storage, handling and microbiological contamination are the major concerns.

Street Foods

Street foods wide range of ready-to-eat foods and beverages prepared and/or sold by vendors and hawkers, especially in streets and other similar public places. *Idly, Wada, Dosa, Chat* Items etc are examples of street foods. They may be contaminated with infective organisms unless hygienically prepared.

Unhealthy (Junk) Foods

Unhealthy foods are those containing little or no proteins, vitamins or minerals but are rich in salt, sugar, fats and are high in energy (calories). Some examples are chocolates, artificially flavoured aerated drinks, potato chips, ice creams French fries etc.

Ques. – Why should we restrict intake of unhealthy processed foods?

Ans. Frequent consumption of unhealthy processed food increase calorie intake without vitamins and minerals. Apart from being nutritious, processed foods also contain food additives. Food additives consumed beyond permissible limits may have adverse effects on health. The national food regulatory authorities periodically review these limits. Thus, consumption of processed foods may not only affect intake of nutrients, but in addition, increase the risk of exposure to various chemical additives.

In the coming years, with larger constraints on time at home, demand for processed foods is certain to increase. Therefore, it is necessary to ensure that intake of a nutritionally balanced diet is not compromised with unwise intake of various processed and convenience foods. Also, processed vegetables and fruits available in the market are no match to nutrient rich fresh vegetables and fruits.

Ques. - Why should we moderate intake of sugar?

Ans. Sugars occur both naturally and as an ingredient in many foods. They are present in natural foods like fruits, vegetables, milk and honey. Added sugars provide taste and texture

to foods. Sugar is present in processed foods like chocolates, jams, ice-creams and soft drinks.

The most familiar sugar is sucrose. Refined or table sugar (sucrose) provides “empty calories”. Foods such as cakes, pastries, confectionery and sweets often have high amounts of fat, and sugar, and are prepared with refined cereals.

Excess of sugary foods may lead to obesity and elevated blood lipids. Children overindulging in chocolates and candies are prone to dental caries. For prevention of diet-related chronic diseases, sugars and refined cereals should be used sparingly.

POINTS TO PONDER

- Prefer traditional, homemade foods.
- Avoid replacing meals with snack foods.
- Limit consumption of sugar and unhealthy processed foods which provide only (empty) calories.
- Prefer fortified processed foods.
- Always read food label (given on containers) regarding nutrients, shelf-life and the additives used.

