

Chow Line

News from the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences

Why choose whole foods over processed?

I'm dating a guy who loves to cook, which is great, but he seems to rely on a lot of processed foods. Would it be worthwhile, health-wise, to try to shift him more toward fresh, whole foods?

Probably, yes. But it depends on what you mean by "processed foods."

Although foods that are minimally processed — frozen fruits and vegetables without sauces or seasonings, for example — fare comparably to their fresh counterparts, highly processed foods often are loaded with sodium, fat, added sugar and calories or are otherwise compromised, such as whole grains being processed into refined grains.

A recent study presented at the American Society for Nutrition annual meeting indicates that processed foods may have larger health implications in the U.S. than previously thought.

The study, conducted at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, examined the nutritional profile of highly processed foods and how pervasive they are in the typical grocery cart. What it found was eye-opening.

Between 2000 and 2012, the researchers asked more than 157,000 households to scan barcodes of all foods and beverages they bought at grocery stores. Most households participated in the study for about four years. The researchers gathered information on each item, including nutrition, product description and ingredient listings, to determine how processed each food item was.

The researchers defined "highly processed" food items as those that contained multiple ingredients and industrially formulated mixtures, including soft drinks, cookies, chips, white bread, candy and prepared meals. In contrast, fresh and frozen fruits and vegetables, milk, eggs, dried beans, and fresh



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meat were classified as unprocessed or minimally processed. The researchers also distinguished between foods that were ready to eat, such as candy and chips; foods that were ready to heat, such as frozen dinners; and foods that required cooking or preparation.

Over the course of the study, the portion of calories from highly processed foods and beverages remained steady at just over 60 percent, the researchers said. By 2012, more than 80 percent of calories from a household's purchases were in ready-to-eat or ready-to-heat form, and those foods tended to be higher in fat, sugar and salt than minimally processed foods. Their conclusion: While processed foods such as canned vegetables and whole-grain breakfast cereal can contribute to a healthful diet, more highly processed foods could be major culprits in overconsumption and obesity.

The researchers said they hope their findings encourage food manufacturers to boost the health and nutrition in processed food products. In the meantime, take a look at your own grocery cart.

Try to focus purchases on fresh, whole and minimally processed foods. Reading labels can help. Products labeled "whole grain" should have at least 2 grams of fiber per serving. Look for products with less than 5 percent of the recommended values for fat or sodium and that have less added sugar.

April 10, 2015

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Editor: This column was reviewed by Daniel Remley, Ohio State University Extension's field specialist in Food, Nutrition and Wellness.

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