



## SHOP SUSTAINABLY

# Be a Savvy Shopper

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An important piece to the sustainable eating puzzle is looking for ways to be a sustainable shopper when buying food. Altogether, the puzzle pieces allow you to be a savvy sustainable consumer.

Most of the foods you eat have been processed in some way. Food processing is important because we do not have access to fresh, local foods all year-round. In fact, food processing greatly contributes to the sustainability of the food system. It has enhanced food and nutrition security across the world and

may reduce food waste for some items. However, there are drawbacks to some processed foods. Highly processed foods have large amounts of sodium, added sugars, and saturated fats. According to the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, these are nutrients we should choose less often in our own dietary patterns. Additionally, large scale food processing requires large amounts of energy and resources. This can be bad for the environment.

Making small changes to choose nutrient-dense, processed foods each week is a step in the right direction toward good health and environmental sustainability.



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## Types of food processing

Processed foods have been cooked, canned, frozen, packaged or changed in nutritional composition by fortification, preservation, or preparation. Any time food is prepared, cooked, or baked, it is processed. Processed foods can be classified into four categories. See Table 1 for examples of different levels of processed foods.

**Table 1. Types of processed foods and examples**

| Processed Food Category                   | Degree of Processing                                                                                                                                                                                     | Examples                                                                                                                                         |
|-------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Unprocessed or Minimally Processed</b> | <i>Unprocessed</i> foods are the natural edible parts of animals and plants.<br><i>Minimally</i> processed foods are slightly altered for preservation purposes, but nutritional content is not changed. | Cleaning, refrigerating, fermenting, freezing, grinding, and removal of inedible or unwanted parts of fruits, vegetables, nuts, and whole grains |
| <b>Processed Culinary Ingredients</b>     | The ingredients gained from pressing, milling, or refining minimally processed foods. You generally do not eat them on their own.                                                                        | Oils from nuts, plants, and seeds; pasta and flour made from whole grains                                                                        |
| <b>Processed Foods</b>                    | Foods from the earlier groups that have added fat, salt, or sugar.                                                                                                                                       | Canned (both home canned and commercial) fruits and veggies; some cheese, freshly made bread, and canned fish                                    |
| <b>Highly or Ultra-Processed Foods</b>    | Foods from the previous groups that include artificial preservatives, colors, and flavors to increase shelf life. They are usually ready to eat.                                                         | Sugar-sweetened beverages, chips, lunch meat, frozen dinners, cookies, and breakfast cereal                                                      |

## Understand the nutritional benefits and drawbacks of processed foods

Reading the Nutrition Facts label and the ingredients list can help you figure out a food’s long-term effects on your health and the environment. Understanding the benefits and drawbacks of packaged and processed foods will help you shop more sustainably.

## Benefits of processed foods

With our current food system, we do rely on processed foods to supply essential nutrients in our diet. Foods that are fortified and enriched are a major source of vitamins and minerals that reduce micronutrient deficiencies in the general population.

- **Fortified:** Fortified means nutrients NOT naturally found in a food have been added to it.

An example would be a whole-grain cereal high in dozens of vitamins and minerals.

- **Enriched:** Enriched means nutrients naturally found in a food have been added back to that food after processing. An example would be adding nutrients back to white bread after the milling process.

Processed foods may include specific food components or nutrients that may be difficult to get in your diet year-round because of limited seasonality of foods in your area or the structure of the food system. You can find many of these on the Nutrition Facts label, which is only on packaged foods. These include dietary fiber, vitamin D, vitamin B12, calcium, potassium, iron, and folate.

Additionally, buying processed, pre-cut fruits and vegetables, either fresh or frozen, at stores can help reduce food waste at home. This will also help people who have challenges cutting or chopping up fresh foods. While you may not have a use for carrot peels or other fruit and vegetable parts, stores are great at using food scraps to create more food, like soup stocks, salads, or sauces.

### Drawbacks of processed foods

Our Dietary Guidelines recommend we choose foods with limited added sugar, sodium, and saturated fat. When we choose foods high in these, it tends to replace other nutrients in our diet. We can use the Nutrition Facts label to look for the amount of added sugar, sodium, or saturated fats in our food choices or look for less processed options that do not include these in high amounts. Look for options that have 5% or less of these nutrients per serving.

Highly processed foods typically mean large amounts of packaging. Think about how many layers of packaging your favorite boxed snack that comes in individually wrapped portions uses. Also, more packaging tends to mean higher prices. Food companies sell those items at a higher cost to help



cover the packaging and other resources needed to manufacture the food.

### Minimize packaging waste from processed foods

Food packaging was designed to improve food safety by reducing foodborne illnesses. Now, food packaging is used for convenience and advertising. Packaging from processed food generates a large amount of waste. The Environmental Protection Agency estimates almost half of all municipal solid waste is made up of food and food packaging materials.

Food is sold in a variety of packaging materials including glass, metal, plastic, or cardboard. Most packaging is designed as single-use and tends to be thrown away instead of reused or recycled. The materials used to package processed foods use environmental resources, generate waste in landfills, are harmful to the environment as they sit in landfills for many years, and litter our natural environments.

Finding food that is not packaged can be a challenge. However, there are opportunities to reduce packaging

waste or choose environmentally friendly packaging options. If recycling is available in your community, choose foods that you know the food packaging can be recycled or repurposed for another use.

## Make your choices healthy and sustainable

There are several ways you can be savvy and sustainable regardless of where you buy food. You may realize you already make choices that support your health and the Earth.



### At the grocery store or supermarket

- Do you need to run to the grocery store and do a few other errands? Plan ahead to reduce trips out for purchases.
- Shop your cabinets before you go and make a grocery list to reduce the urge to impulse buy. This will also reduce the likelihood that you will buy something you already have. In the long run, this could reduce food waste at home and save you money.
- Use reusable bags or go without. This means both plastic bags in the produce section or grocery bags when you check out. Do you have something else you could use instead?
- Look for packaging that says the food manufacturer supports environmentally friendly production, like the USDA Organic seal.

**Table 2. Common grocery items and more sustainable swaps**

| Regularly bought food item                        | Sustainable Swaps                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|---------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Individual oatmeal packets</b>                 | A canister of oatmeal reduces packaging waste and is a versatile pantry staple you can use to add fiber and nutrients to baked goods, smoothies, or as a meat extender.                                                                       |
| <b>Packaged sandwich meats</b>                    | Slices of deli meat freshly cut from behind the deli counter can reduce plastic packaging waste and reduce food waste so you can buy the specific amount you need.                                                                            |
| <b>Can of beans or microwaveable rice packets</b> | A bag of dried beans or rice is a better stretch of food dollars and will keep for an extended time when you store them properly. This allows you to prepare rice or beans seasoned to your preference.                                       |
| <b>Microwave-ready potato</b>                     | Rather than buying an individual potato wrapped in plastic, consider a bag of potatoes that will keep in a cool, dark place. Use a fork to poke a few holes in an unwrapped potato, and you can heat it in the microwave without the plastic. |



- Choose items that have packaging you know you can recycle or reuse creatively (e.g., glass jars).
- Consider varying your protein sources. Next time you are out shopping, look to see if any of the following plant-based proteins are available: legumes (beans and lentils), nuts and seeds, quinoa, or soy-based products like tofu or tempeh. Plant-based proteins are often a great source of fiber, which can benefit health, and help the environment.
- When buying in bulk, ask yourself if you will use the entire item before it expires, or if you have enough space to store it so it won't spoil quickly. Just because the item is a better bargain does not automatically mean it is a good deal.
- Choose items with less packaging, when possible, to reduce waste in your home. See Table 2 below for common items you might buy and more sustainable swaps.

### At a restaurant

- Bring your own bag for carryout.
- Condense leftovers into fewer takeout containers.
- Aim to buy carryout or fast food one less time each month.
- Decline disposable cutlery that may come with a takeout or fast-food meal and use those items from home.
- Ask to use your own coffee travel mug at a coffee shop. Some places may even give a discount when you bring your own cup or mug.

#### Ideas for reducing use of plastic bags

Consider using canvas bags or backpacks to carry leftovers or purchased items home to reduce the use of plastic bags. You could even make your own out of old T-shirts or other materials around the house.



### In your kitchen

- Learn to use whole unprocessed ingredients like dried beans, lentils, and vegetables in your cooking.
- Reuse packaging safely and appropriately as new storage containers.
- Creatively replace plastic wrap, plastic baggies, and plastic storage containers. For example, use dish towels or cloth bowl covers you can wash and reuse when covering bowls rather than plastic wrap.
- Look for secondhand items or ask to borrow kitchen items you may need every once in a while.

#### Ideas for repurposing glass containers

- Store dried goods in your cupboard or pantry
- Store herbs and spices in a cabinet
- Use to pack lunches or snacks for on the go
- Bring to farmers' markets and roadside stands to fill with loose produce like berries
- Use as flower vases
- Use for DIY gifts

## From your backyard

- Hunting wild game and fishing can be a sustainable way to diversify protein in the diet.
- Responsibly hunting for wild game is a way to control wildlife populations. To ensure these hunted species are around for future generations, it is important to obey hunting regulations and respect animal habitats by not disturbing or polluting them.

### Staying safe when foraging, growing, or hunting for your own food

Be aware of how much fish and what type of fish you are eating because some types are more susceptible to pollutants than others. Visit the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources to learn about the most current fish consumption advisories and other helpful identification tips in Kentucky.

## Food for thought

Consuming nutrient-dense foods, which may or may not be processed, can be a convenient, budget-friendly, environmentally sustainable, and healthy alternative to fast food or convenience food options. If you can make one swap or change each month when it comes to your food shopping, you will start to see a domino effect of positive change that may save money at the same time. Think about why you make your decisions. Is it cost, convenience, health, or sustainability? Is it possible to buy items for their durability and environmental impact instead? Does this align with your values? Find a change that is easy for you to adopt and go for it.

- Some processed foods tend to be high in added sugar, sodium, and saturated fats. **Glance at the Nutrition Facts label** to see what the manufacturer has added. Does it have the nutrients you should include in the diet like fiber, vitamin D, or folate to name a few?
- More environmental resources go into producing and packaging processed foods than whole food alternatives. Look to see what your options are for **buying foods in less packaging** at your grocery store. Can you replace one item on your grocery list to reduce packaging?
- Next time you run into the store for one or two items, **skip the bag** and carry them out or use a reusable bag.

## References

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