



EATING 101

RU DINING HEALTHY?

A WEEKLY NEWSLETTER BROUGHT TO YOU BY THE RU HEALTHY DINING TEAM
 A Joint Program Between Rutgers Dining Services and The New Jersey Institute for Food, Nutrition, and Health

Unpacking Processed Foods

Many people hear the term “processed foods” and assume they should avoid them like an 8 a.m. class! But the reality is more nuanced. Food is considered processed anytime it is altered from its natural state, whether through chopping, canning, freezing, or packaging. Just as the volume on your phone exists on a spectrum, food processing does too. While ultra-processed foods often contain added sugars and salts to enhance flavor, minimally processed foods can be nutrient-fortified and fit easily into a healthy diet. While processing is common, the specific method matters; some techniques preserve nutrients while others compromise the food's integrity. The Healthy Dining Team will help you see where your favorites fall and which foods make the nutritional honor roll.

<i>Unprocessed</i>	<i>Minimally Processed</i>	<i>Processed</i>	<i>Ultra-processed</i>	<i>Ultra-processed Low Nutritional Value</i>
Pure whole foods, eaten in their original form.	Minor upgrade for safety, storage, or convenience, without nutritional changes.	Added flavor-boosting ingredients, like salt, making them tastier or longer-lasting.	Modified foods with additives to extend shelf life, taste, texture, or nutrition.	Heavily altered products that have multiple additives but offer little beneficial nutrition.
Washed Spinach	Cleaned, trimmed, packaged spinach	Canned spinach with added salt	Spinach dip with added emulsifiers	Spinach veggie straw chips with artificial flavoring
Whole Orange	Pre-peeled oranges in a package	Canned mandarin oranges in syrup	Shelf-stable orange concentrate drink	Orange flavored gummy candy
Raw whole chicken	Plain boneless chicken thighs	Seasoned and marinated rotisserie chicken	Chicken nuggets made with fillers and stabilizers.	Chicken flavored instant ramen

In general, foods that undergo more intensive processing tend to be higher in sodium, with added sugars, and additives, and lower in nutrients compared to their less-processed counterparts. It is helpful to consider nutrition when selecting processed foods. Rutgers Dining Services supports healthier choices by preparing meals from scratch using fresh ingredients.

Stay calm... I know this is a lot to process.



Revised By: Candace Johnson

Reviewed By: Dr. Peggy Policastro, RDN-Dining Services

References: *Processed Foods: What's OK and What to Avoid* Available at: <https://www.eatright.org/food/nutrition/nutrition-facts-and-food-labels/processed-foods-whats-ok-and-what-to-avoid>. Accessed on: 3/7/26. *Processed Foods and Health* Available at: <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/processed-foods/> Accessed on: 3/7/26.



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