

Whole Foods vs. Processed Foods

Food runs from barely processed to heavily processed — not from good to bad. Choose the less-processed version a little more often, and keep the foods you enjoy.

The closer a food is to its whole form, the more fiber and nutrients usually come with it. **Processed does not mean bad.** Federal food law uses the word for anything canned, cooked, frozen, dried or milled — which takes in most of a normal kitchen.



A whole food, and the same food processed. Washing and cooking turn whole tomatoes into sauce; that work is the processing. Make this month's **Sun-Dried Marinara** and do that work in your own kitchen.

HOW FAR A FOOD SITS FROM ITS WHOLE FORM —

BARELY PROCESSED

HEAVILY PROCESSED

Minimally processed

Bagged spinach, plain frozen berries, canned beans, rolled oats.

More processed

Cheese, bread, jarred pasta sauce, canned soup.

Heavily processed

Candy, chips, sugary drinks, packaged pastries.

Processing is just work done to food before it reaches you — washing, freezing, chopping, canning. Most of it helps food store longer and makes it easier to use. **The healthier move is to reach less often for the heavily processed items** — the ones where added sugar, salt and refined ingredients pile up alongside a long ingredient list.

Sources: U.S. Food and Drug Administration — **Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act §201(gg)**, which defines a processed food as any food other than a raw agricultural commodity, including one subjected to canning, cooking, freezing, dehydration or milling · U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services and Agriculture, **Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2025-2030** (10th edition, January 2026). Page 1 of 2 · NuStart Health. Pairs with the NuStart Block **Whole Food vs. Processed Food**.

The processing bands are everyday groupings, not a scientific scale.

Wellness education, not medical advice. For questions about your health, medications, or a condition you manage, discuss them with your primary care provider.

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THE TWO ENDS, SIDE BY SIDE

WHAT EACH END ACTUALLY IS

WHOLE FOODS

A whole food is close to how it grows: an apple, a handful of almonds, a sweet potato.

Why whole foods and fiber matter

Foods closer to their whole form usually carry more fiber, vitamins and minerals. Fiber does several jobs: it can help you feel full and satisfied, it helps keep digestion moving, and certain fibers feed the bacteria in your gut. You do not need a perfect diet — just more whole food, more often.

- Whole grains, beans and lentils are rich in fiber and plant protein.
- Fruits and vegetables add fiber, color and a range of nutrients.

PROCESSED FOODS

Processed just means a food has been changed from how it grew — frozen, chopped, canned. Plenty of processed foods belong on your plate.

What the ingredient list tells you

Ingredients are listed heaviest first, so where sugar or refined flour lands in that list says more than the front of the box will. When two options sit side by side, the shorter ingredient list is usually the less-processed one.

- Canned, frozen and dried vegetables and fruits all count toward a nutrient-dense plate.
- A long run of refined ingredients is a signal to slow down, not to give the food up.



Canned beans are processed. They are also fiber, plant protein and a minute of work.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Whole foods first. When food does come in a package, go for fewer ingredients — small swaps, made often, do the work.

PUT ONE OF YOURS ON THE SPECTRUM

Pick one food you already keep in the house and turn it over. Write it below, then write the less-processed version you would reach for next time. **One swap is enough to start.**

WHAT YOU KEEP NOW

THE LESS-PROCESSED VERSION

WHEN YOU WILL PICK IT UP