

Cutting Back on Processed Foods You Eat and Drink!

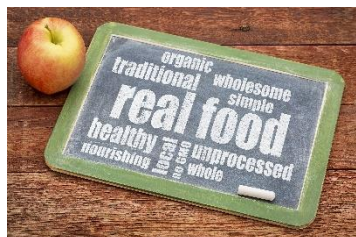
Hi Kids! Well, for the past few months we've been talking about "*plant-based foods*" - what they are, what is in them (natural, powerful nutrients!), why they are good for our bodies, etc. During some of these discussions (and presented in some previous PBF Guides), we have used the term "processed foods," usually in a recommendation to cut back on processed foods and beverages. Some of you may have thought, "what do they mean by 'processed foods and beverages?'" or 'what if I don't know how to cut back on these?'" Well, this PBF Guide gives you answers to these questions, and more, about **cutting back on processed foods you eat and drink**, and instead, focusing on real foods!



So, just what are **processed** foods? Let's begin with the definition of the word, processed, which is "to treat or prepare by some particular series of actions, as in manufacturing."¹ Just about everything in our lives is created through "processing" of some sort, *but our food doesn't have to be!* When we talk about "processed foods" we are talking about those foods that have gone through some *mechanized* process; the foods have been put through machines and made into something different than they looked like when they were grown. Processed foods often come in a box or a jar, and contain added preservatives (chemicals that make the food last longer than it would without these chemicals). Snack foods, candy, cookies, chips, and crackers are probably what you think of when you think about "processed foods." However, some "healthy" foods can fall into this category too, like cereal, salad dressings and such. Many of these processed foods are high in added sugars, low in fiber and whole grains, very low in vital nutrients, high in fat and/or include trans fat and lots of saturated fat, and unfortunately are processed with sodium and preservatives in most cases. Our bodies do not need any of these things – we need healthy unprocessed foods!



So, when we think about **cutting back on processed foods and beverages** we consume each day, what do we do? How do we do it, especially when processed foods make up so much of what we eat?! The first thing is that we have to do this gradually – it's not a good idea to go "cold turkey" and cut out all processed foods at one time! Select a few processed foods you consume each day, and work on cutting out those first. Maybe think about cutting out highly-processed breakfast cereal, and instead, make some stone ground oat meal, topped with microwaved apple pieces and raisins. Consider switching out your snack crackers or cookies and eat some mandarin orange slices instead! How about making your own salad dressing, so it has less sugar, fat, sodium, and doesn't contain yucky preservatives?!



In the rest of this PBF Guide, we provide some suggestions (and challenges for you and your family and friends!) for cutting back on **processed foods and beverages**, including *substitution* foods, recipes for *unprocessed foods/dressings/sauces* that you can make at home instead of buying them in a highly-processed form, and other fun info about how to make this change in your eating habits!² If you decide to try to cut some processed foods, please share your experiences with us!

Share your experiences using #CommittoHealth and by tagging NRPA!

@National Recreation and Park Association (Facebook), @NRPA_news (Twitter) and @nrpa (Instagram)

¹ <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/processed>

²For more information, suggestions, and recipes to help with this eating practice, refer back to other PBF Guides such as "Plant-based Power Breakfasts" and "Plant-based Snacks!"

Activity 1: Ideas for Cutting Back on Processed Foods & a 1-week Challenge!!



For kids in grades 3 and up (and adults!): Write down 3 *processed foods* you most often eat in Column 2 (cereal, salad dressing, bread, crackers, chips, canned soup, etc.). Then, in Column 3, write down an *unprocessed food* that you may like to try instead of your usual processed food! Finally, in Column 4, write down how the unprocessed food in Column 3 is better for you than the food you listed in Column 2.

Column 1	Column 2: Name of your usual processed food	Column 3: Name of unprocessed food you would like to try, instead of the food in Column 2	Column 4: Write how the unprocessed food item in Column 3 is better for you (less sugar, fat, sodium; more nutrients; etc.)
1			
2			
3			

The 1-Week “Cutting Back on Processed Foods” Challenge!

Now that you’ve read and talked about *cutting down on processed foods*, we would like to challenge you, and your family and friends, to a **1-week Cutting Back on Processed Foods Challenge!** Copy this page for everyone in your Challenge, encourage them to complete the table below, and share results with each other via text, Instagram, Facebook (snap a picture), or the old way, in person! We hope you will see just how yummy unprocessed foods can be, and perhaps you’ll continue to work on reducing consumption of processed foods after the Challenge ends!

WRITE CHALLENGE START DATE HERE: _____

Challenge Day	Day of the week (Write it in)	List a processed food you often consume, that you will avoid this day!	Write down the unprocessed food you consumed instead of the processed food you avoided, and describe something about it (how you enjoyed it, the recipe you used, who you shared it with, etc.)
Day 1			
Day 2			
Day 3			
Day 4			
Day 5			
Day 6			
Day 7			

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Activity 2: Eat Real, Healthy Food!



For kids in grades PreK through 2: Color the face made from super-healthy foods! When you eat, remember to pick healthy foods like **apples, broccoli, strawberries, and bananas** that are yummy and make us strong and healthy! Adults, ask the kids which of the foods shown in the face coloring sheet they eat as snacks or meals. Encourage them to think about trying these and other plant-based whole *unprocessed* foods, instead of *processed* foods (like crackers, cookies, chips, etc.).



How to Cut Back on Processed Foods



Research shows that “cleaner” eating habits, which include eating more whole, *unprocessed foods* and fewer *processed foods*, can help us maintain a healthy weight, reduce headaches and migraines, have healthier hair and skin, stronger nails, more energy, fewer mood swings and sharper memory, fewer food cravings, better sleep, fewer colds, and more!¹

So just how do you go about cutting back on your *consumption of processed foods*, especially when they are so ingrained in our daily eating practices? Well, it isn't a “quick fix,” but rather should be done in steps! But no worries, you can do it!! Below we present some strategies for cutting back on processed foods, and on the next page we provide a few recipes for substitutes for some typical processed foods.

1. **Shop on the outside edges of the store:** Have you noticed that the aisles at your local grocery are packed full of, well, packages – packages of processed foods?! So to begin cutting back on processed foods, shop the edges of your store where you find unprocessed (or minimally processed), nutritious, whole foods like fruits and vegetables, meat, eggs, dairy, and seafood. Of course, there are a few items you will need to get in the aisles, like dried whole grains, but try to stay on the outside of the store for most of your shopping.
2. **Read the ingredients label:** The more ingredients, the more highly processed the item! If an item contains five (5) or more ingredients, and includes a lot of unfamiliar, unpronounceable ingredients, consider leaving it at the store!
3. **Eat more whole foods:** Fruits, vegetables, and whole grains can displace the processed foods in your diet, and can make your food selections in general very simple. No more counting calories, fat grams, or carbs if you take this route!
4. **Avoid boxes, bags, and cans:** Obviously, if something comes pre-packaged, it has been processed! Food manufacturers dehydrate, bleach, enrich, salt, sweeten, and fatten food to compensate for the flavor and nutrition that is lost during processing to put the food into the box. *For example, white bread has very little natural nutrition. Instead, the vitamins found in it, as well as the sugar and salt, are added back after they are stripped during processing. A better choice is to purchase whole-wheat bakery bread that is made fresh at the store—it's more likely to be made from natural ingredients.*
5. **Don't order off the kids' menu:** When you go out to eat as a family, you may want to think twice about the kids menu! Most items typically on kids menus are highly processed - pre-made chicken nuggets, macaroni and cheese, deep-fried French fries, pasta made with white flour, etc. As an alternative, make up your own kids meal by ordering a baked potato (without the fatty cheeses and butter!), sides of vegetables, and sharing some protein from your meal.
6. **Drink water:** Yes, most beverages are highly processed! Instead of sugar-sweetened beverages that have lots of sugar, artificial sweeteners, artificial flavorings, and food dye, stick with water when you are thirsty! Squeeze a bit of lemon or orange or lime into your water, or crush up some berries, to give it a hint of natural sweetness and flavor.
7. **Make your own sauces and salad dressings:** Yes, you can make your own sauces and salad dressings quite easily! Check out some sample recipes on the next page. Home-made sauces and salad dressings help you avoid preservatives, sugar, artificial sweeteners and flavorings, food dye, sodium and many other bad things!
8. **Cook at home!:** Try to cook more at home – this is the only way to really know what is in your food, and thus ensure you consume the least amount of processed foods as possible! Be adventurous, try new cuisines, find recipes online for natural meals, have “family Friday cook nights” and other exciting events to celebrate cooking healthily at home!

Adapted from: <https://www.100daysofrealfood.com/real-food-tips-8-ways-to-avoid-processed-food/>;
<https://www.active.com/nutrition/articles/7-tips-to-avoid-processed-foods>; <https://www.eatthis.com/stop-eating-processed-foods/>; <https://www.active.com/nutrition/articles/7-tips-to-avoid-processed-foods>

Easy-to-make Substitutions for 3 Common Processed Foods

Balsamic Vinaigrette¹

- 3 tablespoons balsamic vinegar
- 1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
- 1 garlic clove, minced (1 tsp prepared, minced garlic)
- ½ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- Salt and pepper

In a small bowl, combine the vinegar, mustard, and garlic. Add the oil in a slow steady stream, whisking constantly. Season with salt and pepper to taste.

Homemade Ranch Dressing²

- ½ cup mayonnaise
- ½ cup sour cream
- ½ cup buttermilk or regular milk
- ¾ - 1 teaspoon dried dill weed
- ½ teaspoon dried parsley
- ½ teaspoon dried chives
- ¼ teaspoon onion powder
- ½ teaspoon garlic powder
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- ⅛ teaspoon pepper
- 1-3 teaspoons freshly squeezed lemon juice (or bottled lemon juice), adjust to taste



Whisk together the mayo, sour cream, and milk until smooth. Add the spices and whisk until combined. Add the lemon juice, and whisk again. Pour into a jar and chill in the refrigerator until ready to serve. This dressing will keep nicely in the refrigerator for up to a week.

Fresh, Home-made Tomato Sauce – for pasta, pizzas!¹

- 2 Tbsp. olive oil
- 2-3 cloves garlic, chopped (2-3 tsp minced garlic)
- 1 28 oz can crushed **tomatoes**
- 2 tsp Italian seasoning
- Salt and pepper to taste
- 1 pinch red pepper flakes (optional)
- Fresh Italian parsley, or basil to taste (optional)



Heat oil in skillet over medium-high heat. Add garlic, sauté about 20 seconds till fragrant (don't let it brown/burn!). Carefully add tomatoes, then Italian seasoning, salt, pepper, and red pepper flakes, if using. Stir till combined. Add ¼ cup water, bring to slight boil, then reduce to a simmer. Simmer till sauce thickens, stirring occasionally (about 15 minutes). Stir in fresh herbs before serving. Serve over whole wheat pasta, squash noodles, or use as a pizza sauce.

**Look up home-made recipes for other common processed foods such as:
granola, oatmeal, soups, breads, pizza crusts, and more! Spend time in your kitchen, and eat less processed food!**

¹Recipe from Dr. Danielle Hollar's kitchen.

²Recipe adapted from and photo found at: <https://barefeetinthekitchen.com/homemade-ranch-salad-dressing/>