

## **Myths and Facts about Processed Foods**

*Article published by the European Food Information Council ([www.eufic.org](http://www.eufic.org))*

Consumers today are faced with a wide variety of food choices. Processed foods offer variety and enjoyment to our diets. In this article Food Today looks at some of the myths and facts about processed foods.

### **Myth: Processed foods offer no benefits**

**Fact:** Food processing makes many foods available that we could not otherwise eat. Without food processing we certainly would not have the large variety of food products we see on supermarket and store shelves. Food processing enables the year-round availability of foods that have limited growing seasons. Frozen and canned fruits, vegetables and meat products are examples.

Processing extends the shelf life of foods. Tinned fish and UHT milk are two examples of nutritious foods that are readily available as a result of food processing.

Processing also improves food safety by a variety of methods— for example, heating to sufficiently high temperatures destroys harmful bacteria; certain additives help prevent fats going off (rancid) and prevent the growth of harmful fungus and bacteria; packaging helps to prevent product tampering.

Convenience is another major benefit of foods that have been processed. Imagine not having frozen food or tinned vegetables for that quick and easy Sunday dinner.

### **Myth: Processed foods are not as nutritious as fresh foods**

**Fact:** Many processed foods are just as nutritious or in some cases even more nutritious than fresh foods that have been stored depending on the manner in which they are processed.

Frozen vegetables are usually processed within a few hours of harvest. There is little nutrient loss in the freezing process, so frozen vegetables retain their high vitamin and mineral content. In contrast, fresh vegetables are picked and transported to market. It can take days or even weeks before they reach the dinner table and vitamins are gradually lost over time no matter how carefully the vegetables are transported and stored.

Some processing methods can cause the loss of certain nutrients e.g. some vitamins and minerals are lost in cooking water or parts of the grain that are removed to produce white flour). However, the processing of foods can also add nutritional benefits. For example, lycopene, a powerful antioxidant (a protective substance for the body) found in tomatoes and watermelons, has been shown to become more available to the body (“bio-available”) when the tomatoes are processed into for example tomato paste, ketchup or soup.

### **Myth: The additives in processed foods are not necessary**

**Fact:** Food additives play an important role in preserving the freshness, safety, taste, appearance and texture of processed foods. Food additives are added for particular purposes, whether it is to ensure food safety or to maintain food quality during the shelf-life of a product. For example,

antioxidants prevent fats and oils from becoming rancid while preservatives prevent or reduce the growth of microbes (e.g. mould on bread) and thickeners allow fruit preparations to “gel” so they can be spread onto toasted bread.

Food colourings are used to increase the appeal of foods. While food colourings do not impart improved safety or texture, they offer consumers a choice of products that may appeal to them or add to their enjoyment of the diet due to its colour. Food additives can supply specific sensory properties (e.g. taste and texture) to foods to meet cultural habits and consumer’s expectations.

All food additives must be approved by appropriate authorities and strict limits are placed on the amount and types of additives in foods. Any additive must be included in the ingredients listing on a package ensuring that consumers have a choice.