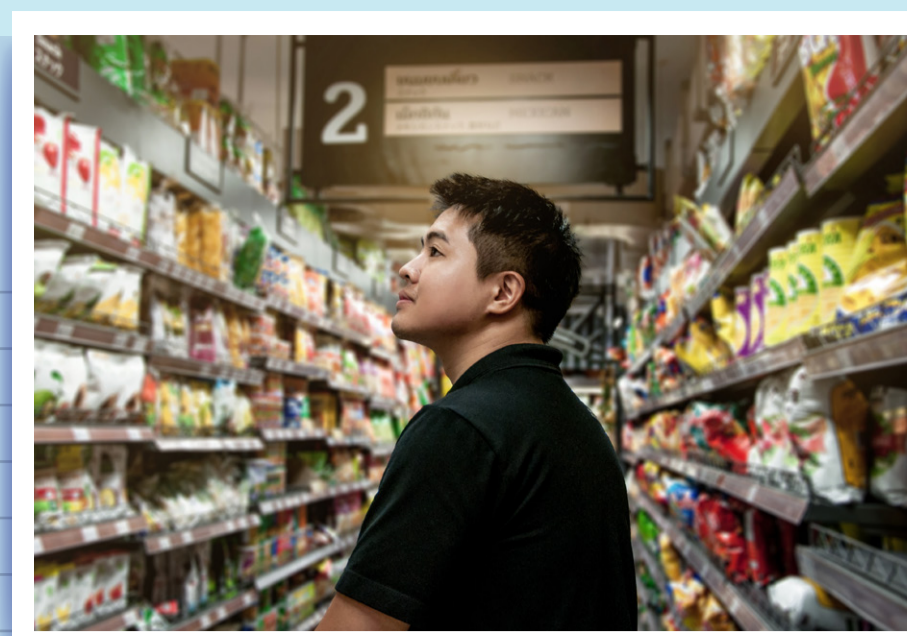


# Understanding Processed Food & How We Can Eat Them Right



From farm to table, what goes on in between is food processing, which turns fresh food into a variety of food products. Processing food helps to extend the shelf life and can enhance its taste and make it more nutrient-dense, such as in milk or canned tomatoes and tuna.

However, there is another form of food processing which in recent decades has seen its products flying off the shelves and taking the consumer market by storm. Ultra-processing, which manufactures products such as soft drinks, biscuits, chips, candy, hotdogs, nuggets, frozen pizza and more, boast convenience and are widely loved by consumers all around the world.

Unfortunately, the way these loved products are manufactured could be of concern for our body. They usually comprise cheap ingredients (such as salt, oils and sugars), combined with chemical food additives (such as artificial flavours, emulsifiers and trans-fat); and undergo multiple industrial-scale processing procedures before being ready for consumption.

These contribute to a poor nutritional profile which impacts consumers' risks of chronic diseases such as obesity, high blood pressure, diabetes, cancer and more. Yet, this doesn't wane our consumption of processed food.

Indeed, they can be great time-savers for the busy Singaporean lifestyle – we tend to opt for the most time-efficient and convenient alternatives. Our tastebuds have also become accustomed to the taste of these enhanced savoury and sweet products which we often refer to as our “guilty pleasures” or “comfort food”. Each of these product types also boasts a great variety across different brands and flavours, which makes us truly spoiled for choice.

We then ask ourselves,

**“How do we know which processed foods to avoid? Are all of them bad? Do processed food products have any nutrients at all?”**

Understanding the food labels on processed food products can help us make better judgement of our food choices and take ownership for our health.

We speak with **Mr Chan Joy Seng, Nutritionist and Director of Alive Nutrition Consultancy**, who shares with us some tips when it comes to reading food labels.

**Nutritionist's Tips**

## 01 Check for real foods

“Check for real foods – the more that are listed, the better for your health. If the list is cluttered with names of chemical compounds and additives, the product may not be very good for your health.”

## 02 Look out for misleading ingredients

“Some misleading ingredients include:

### Vegetable oil

When the type of vegetable oil isn't specified, it's usually palm oil, which is full of unhealthy saturated fat and worse for your health than other plant varieties like canola, sunflower or peanut oils.

### Milk solids

This refers to milk powder, in which most of the vitamins in milk are lost through processing.

### Brown sugar

The only difference between white and brown sugar is that brown sugar contains residual molasses, which give it a darker colour and different taste. It's just as unhealthy as the white sugar.

### Sea salt and Himalayan salt

These are not healthier alternatives to table salt – only low-sodium salt is.”

## 03 Ensure fair comparison by comparing similar products and use the “per 100g” nutrient values listed in the Nutrition Information Panel

“Take note that using the per 100g measure will not be that effective when comparing different food items. For example, 100g of soft drink is going to contain a lot less sugar than 100g of milk chocolate. That doesn't mean it's a lot healthier than milk chocolate. Soft drinks simply has a much higher water content than milk chocolate.”

## 04 Don't take nutrient content claims at face value

“The term ‘fat-free’ does not translate into low calories. Fat-free foods may be compensated by a high amount of sugar to make them taste better. Don't be fooled either when you see ‘cholesterol-free’ on a bottle of palm oil. Cholesterol is only from animal sources. But that doesn't mean palm oil is any healthier. In fact, it's still high in saturated fat, which is really bad for your heart.”

## 05 Exercise moderation even when consuming products with the Healthier Choice Symbol (HCS) logo

“The Health Promotion Board (HPB) assesses the amount of specific nutrients such as sugar, sodium and fats, and compares them with similar products. For foods already very high in a particular nutrient of concern, such as sweetened beverages, the Healthier Choice Symbol can only point out the lesser of two evils but definitely does not guarantee you a healthy choice. Seeing the HCS logo on the food label is no excuse to eat more of that product.”

The key to eating right is always in moderation. Knowing what is in your food helps increase awareness of the harm or good you are doing to your body. Choose products which consists of more whole, nutrient-dense foods. If you can, challenge yourself to cancel out the extra processing steps as much as possible, making it truly farm to table.

**Start your year well, eat them right!**