

The 10 Healthiest Packaged Foods

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The healthiest foods are the foods that come straight out of the garden and are consumed in their natural form or as simply prepared as possible. These foods are fresh fruits, vegetables, starchy vegetables, legumes, and intact whole grains and should be the focus of any healthy diet.

Packaged and processed foods are usually loaded with fats, free oils, salt, refined sugars/sweeteners and refined carbohydrates/grains, They are also almost always calorie dense.

However, there are some packaged and processed foods that can be included as part of a healthy diet. And in fact, keeping some of them around and on hand, can actually make following a healthy diet, easier.

Everyone always wants to know what foods I personally eat and/or recommend. So, I went around my house and looked around to see what packaged and processed foods I had in my house and would recommend to you, and why. Here they are.

1) Frozen Vegetables

Vegetables are the most nutrient dense food there is and including more of them in your diet is a key to improving the nutritional quality of your diet. Unlike many canned vegetables, plain frozen individual vegetables usually have no other added ingredients. Frozen peas and beans may have some added salt, but they usually make my 1:1 sodium/calorie guideline. Frozen vegetables can easily be thawed and including as part of a healthy recipe and/or meal. These are one of the main ingredients in my Basic Recipes

Caution: Be careful of all the new fancy frozen vegetable mixes as many come with added sauces that can be high in salt, sugar and or fat. Look for the plain bags of single individual vegetables of vegetable blends.

2) Frozen Fruits

The same reasoning for frozen vegetables also applies to frozen fruits. Look for the ones that contain just frozen fruit and avoid the ones with added sugars/sweeteners. Frozen berries are one of my favorites to keep on hand. Fresh berries are very seasonal, and they also often mold and rot quickly and easily. Frozen berries do not and are available year round. In addition, you can often find wild berries, including blueberries and strawberries, which are often sweeter and more nutrient dense.

3) Quick Cooking Brown Rice

My favorite kind of rice, is basmati brown rice. I love the taste and the aroma, especially when it is cooking. It smells like popcorn popping. However, I do not always have the 40 minutes to prepare the basmati brown rice from scratch. Nor do I always have some cooked up ahead of time. The solution, is anyone of the varieties available of "quick cooking" brown rice. While I do not usually like to promote a specific brand, one brand that I do prefer is Success Quick Cooking Brown Rice. This brand and variety has to be the simplest and easiest version of quick cooking brown rice ever invented. Many other versions require the measurement of water and rice (which can be troublesome for some). :) However, with this version all you do is place a pre-measured bag in a pot of boiling water for 10 minutes and wah-lah! perfect brown rice. For those of you who want to avoid using the plastic bag, just remove the rice from it and cook in boiling water. You can now also get frozen pre-cooked whole grain brown rice that is quick and simple to prepare.

4) No Salt Added Shelf-Stable Beans

Next to green leafy veggies and vegetables, beans may be one of the most nutrient rich foods there is. They are rich in nutrients and fiber, very filling and relatively low in calorie density. The problem with beans for many of us is that most beans can take hours to cook and most canned beans are extremely high in sodium. So, for those in a hurry, the solution is to buy no salt added shelf-stable beans. One of my favorites is Eden Foods No Salt Added Canned Beans. There are about 12 varieties of beans available from them, including Kidney, Black, Garbanzo, Pinto, Adzuki, etc. Not only are they available online, and in health food stores, I also find most local grocery stores are now carrying them. Just open a can and add them to your favorite dish, recipe or meal. These are one of the main ingredients in my Basic Recipes. Again, while I do not like to promote a specific brand, Eden Foods canned beans are one of the best out there and they are also the only canned bean that is BPA free. There are also now a few varieties of no-salt added, organic beans that are packed in an aseptic shelf-stable container that are sold by Fig Foods and by Whole Foods.

5) No Salt Added Shelf-Stable Tomato Products

Tomatoes make a great base for many dressings, sauces, soups and meals (i.e., stews, chili's, etc). However, good fresh tomatoes are not always available year round and some of the one that are available in the off-season are literally tasteless. In addition, while there are some canned varieties that are salt free, most canned tomato products are extremely high in sodium and contain BPA. However, one brand I prefer is POMI brand tomato products as they are both salt free, shelf stable and BPA free. While these tomato product could never substitute for a fresh "in season" tomato on a salad, they can help make excellent soups, sauces, and meals when fresh tomatoes are out of season or when you are in a pinch. These are one of the main ingredients in my Basic Recipes. If you can't find POMI Tomatoes, look for any brand of no salt added canned tomatoes.

6) Intact Whole Grains (Buckwheat, Brown Rice, Oatmeal, etc)

Whole grains that are consumed in their "intact" form are low in calorie density, high in satiety, nutrient rich and shelf stable. They are easy to cook (just add water) and can be the base of many healthy meals and dishes. They also make great additions to soups and salads. Oatmeal, buckwheat, and barley all make a great breakfast and a great way to start the day. Brown rice, cracked wheat, quinoa, and/or millet mixed with vegetables make a great meal, side dish and or salad. My favorites are the ones that I can cook from start to end in 10 minutes. These include oats, buckwheat, quinoa and millet.

7) Whole Grain Pasta

The problem with many whole grain processed products (like bread, dry cereals, bagels, crackers and tortilla's) is that even though they are whole grain, they are still calorie dense. The only exception is whole grain pasta. The reason is, when you cook whole grain pasta, it absorbs some of the water it is cooked in, which is absorbed into the structure of the pasta, lowering its calorie density. Foods with high water content, are lower in calorie density and generally higher in satiety.

So, unlike most processed whole grains, which have a calorie density of 1200-1800 calories per pound, the calorie density of most cooked whole grain pasta is the same as most intact whole grains and starchy vegetables, which is around 500-600 calories per pound. It is also very quick and easy to cook and can be ready in around 10 minutes. Mix in some fresh or frozen vegetables, some no salt added tomatoes and some fresh spices and you have a healthy, nutritious and filling meal.

8) Dried Fruit

Dried fruit is nature's candy. Unlike fresh fruit, it is shelf stable and will not spoil easily. Adding small amounts of dried fruit to dishes can add both nutrition and sweetness. A few raisins or dates can really sweeten up a bowl of fruit and they also go great in a bowl of whole grain cereal like oatmeal or as part of a dessert like baked apples. In addition, they make great additions by adding a little sweetness to a large vegetable salad, or even some cooked dishes like stews and rice.

However, due to their high calorie density, go easy on them and think of them more as a condiment. Dried fruit is around 1200 calories per pound where most fresh fruit is under 300 calories per pound

Grapes 300 cal/lbs

Raisins 1357 cal/lb

Plums 200 cal/lb

Prunes 1100 cal/lb

9) Unsalted Raw Nuts/Seeds and Nut/Seed Butter

Raw nuts and seeds, and the "butters" made from them, are rich in nutrients especially minerals. A few of them, like walnuts and flax seeds are also excellent sources of the omega 3 essential fat. They are also shelf stable and will not spoil easily. They can add creaminess and texture to some home made dressings and dips/spreads and/or soups. I sometimes make a salad dressing that is made from a little tahini (sesame seed butter) mixed with lemon and water. I also add a small amount of tahini to blended garbanzo beans to add some texture to my homemade hummus.

However, due to their extremely high calorie density, go very easy on them especially if weight is an issue for you. In general, I recommend consuming no more than 1-2 oz a day at most. If you are struggling with your weight, I recommend either eliminating them or limiting them even more, to no more than 1oz, 2-5x a week. And, when you do use them, make sure you mix them with something low in calorie density, like vegetables or fruits.

10) Salt Free Spices/Seasonings/Herbs

As you decrease the amount of salt, sugar and oil in your diet, you will begin to appreciate the wonderful natural flavors of food. However, some people still like to add a little "spice" to their life. Fortunately, there are many salt-free spices, seasonings and blends available. Probably the most popular one is Mrs. Dash, which has many varieties available. In addition, for those of you who are not a chef and not familiar with the different flavor combinations of spices, you can now buy many salt free blends that can help. There are pre-mixed blends of salt-free Italian, Mexican, Indian, Southern and many other blends available.

There you go. My favorite 10 packaged staple foods that are not only good for you and can be included as part of a healthy diet. And in fact, keeping some of them around and on hand, can actually make following a healthy diet, easier. Enjoy!

In Health

Jeff

PS, shortly after writing the original version of this article, I saw a discussion of dehydrated foods. I would now include these in my list as that can be a valuable addition to keep around. However, I want to keep my list at 10 :) Maybe I will add it into the Dried Fruit point and change it to Dried and dehydrated fruits, vegetables and other foods.

