

# FACT SHEET

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## SHOPPING FOR CONVENIENCE FOODS

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Convenience foods are here to stay. For people with limited time, convenience foods are lifesavers. Quality assurance also may be a factor in their favor. More than 80 percent of the 8,000 food items found in grocery stores are convenience foods.

### Processed foods

Convenience foods undergo processing or preparation which is ordinarily done in the home before reaching retail markets. This includes canning, freezing, freeze drying, dehydrating, concentrating, cooking, packaging and bottling. Newer convenience foods offer more built-in services such as paring, chopping, sieving, grating, mixing and basic measuring.

The convenience food concept has changed through the years. To the homemaker of several decades ago, a loaf of bread was a real convenience treat. Now, the homemade loaf of bread is the treat. Convenience items including bread mixes and partially baked or shaped loaves are popular.

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New processing techniques mean more convenience foods. Some improved methods used for new food products are listed below.

*Freeze-drying:* freeze-dried coffee, fruit in dry cereal and soup mixes

*Dehydrating:* potato flakes, onion flakes and powdered drinks

*Canning:* sterilized milk, canned pudding and canned meat salads

*Freezing:* vegetable and cream sauces and frozen entrees

*Packaging:* individual portions, snack packs, boiling bags and flip-top cans

### Time savers

Convenience foods usually—but not always—save preparation time. Studies conducted by the Drexel Institute<sup>1</sup> and USDA<sup>2</sup> show that convenience meals can be prepared in a fourth of the time required to prepare meals from scratch and at approximately the same cost.

Use of convenience foods eliminates some routine tasks of cleaning, squeezing, peeling, measuring and mixing. Preparation is simplified and dishwashing is reduced because fewer utensils are used.

### Convenience food costs

Convenience foods may or may not cost more than the same food prepared entirely by you. Total food costs must include money spent for ingredients, preparation and storage, electricity or gas and your time.

Whether or not convenience foods cost more or less than processed foods will depend upon the following factors.

- a product's seasonality and when it is purchased
- a product's bulkiness and its shipping and handling
- cost of equipment, labor and ingredients involved in getting the product into marketable form



- the kind and size of package (novelty packages or individual units assembled in a larger package usually add to the cost)
- a product's perishability
- the volume at which the product is produced
- current sale items

Two recent surveys<sup>3,4</sup> revealed that some convenience foods cost less while others cost up to three times the cost of ingredients alone.

- Four frozen plate dinners—ready-to-heat meat loaf, beef, turkey and fried chicken—cost 25 to 110 percent more than their home-prepared counterparts.
- Frozen ready-to-heat main dishes differed in costs among brands due to varying amounts of meat or poultry. Generally, more price variation existed between frozen and home-made counterparts than between the canned and homemade counterparts. Similarly, cheese pizza made from a packaged mix costs only slightly more than pizza made from scratch. Frozen pizza ready for the oven costs 60 percent more.
- Bakery products including apple pie, pound cake, sugar cookies, brownies, waffles and baking powder biscuits made from mixes ranged in cost from slightly less to a third more than similar foods made from scratch.
- Frozen french fries and processed mashed potatoes cost the same or less than those prepared at home. Dehydrated au gratin potatoes, however, cost more than their home-made counterpart.
- Store-squeezed, fresh, canned and frozen concentrate orange juice cost much less than the fresh, home-squeezed counterpart. Frozen orange juice concentrate was the best buy in orange juice.

Convenience foods, even at higher costs than similar home-prepared foods, may be the best buy for the homemaker with limited time or cooking skills. Convenience foods also may be more practical for the small family or the person living alone than are recipes requiring many ingredients and providing several servings.

Savings or costs from using convenience foods depend upon the items. A convenience food containing frequently-used ingredients stored in the home kitchen may be added expenses. On the other hand, buying large amounts of infrequently-used ingredients to prepare a meal saves neither time nor money.

### Quality of convenience foods

The nutritive value of convenience foods may or may not equal that of non-processed foods. Recently, food manufacturers have increased fortification and enrichment of convenience foods. Only by reading the label, however, can you be assured of added nutrients. Food products recently fortified and enriched include canned or dehydrated fruit drinks with vitamin C and cake or bread mixes with B vitamins and iron.

Recent legislation from the Food and Drug Administration attempts to upgrade and standardize the nutritive value of frozen, ready-to-heat plate dinners. These dinners would include a meat, poultry, fish or cheese food item; a vegetable other than potatoes or rice; potatoes, rice or another cereal-based product; and at least 340 calories.

Other factors determining convenience food quality are the appearance, taste, texture and color of the final product. Convenience foods do not always meet the home-prepared standards. For example, biscuits or fried chicken "mama used to make" just do not rank in the same class as their convenience counterparts.

Convenience foods may assure quality the homemaker is unable to obtain because of limited skills. Examples include souffles and breads. Because the quality of convenience foods is consistent, the consumer can be assured of the same taste, color and appearance.

### Food variety

Convenience foods give the homemaker an opportunity to add interest and variety to meals.

With convenience foods, it is possible to introduce a gourmet touch to menus without extra work. Many famous restaurants now have their house specialties packaged and available in supermarkets. New flavors are easily added to old foods through the use of instant sauces, salad dressings and toppings.

Variety is offered with these foods, and menu possibilities are widened. Convenience foods allow combinations of in-season foods with out-of-season products in a processed form.

Convenience foods also offer the creative cook an opportunity to stretch her imagination. In addition to serving convenience foods as they are, the skillful homemaker can add seasonings and other foods to produce her special dish.

### Your choice

Careful shoppers determine which convenience foods are the best buys for their families. Every consumer influences which convenience foods stay on the market and which do not by selections and spending patterns. Your choices for convenience foods may depend on the following considerations.

*Service:* Will the product relieve you of work you would rather not do?

*Quality:* Will the product meet the quality of your home-prepared variety?

*Nutritive value:* Will the product provide as many nutrients as your home-prepared product?

*Time:* Will the time saved by using this product allow time for other activities?

*Storage:* Will the product require special storage facilities?

*Cost:* Will the product cost more or less per serving than the home-prepared product?

### Footnotes

1. *Comparison of Preparation Time and Costs of Convenience and Home Prepared Food*, Food and Nutrition Department, Drexel Institute of Technology, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
2. *Food Buying Guide*, Unit 2, Extension Service, North Dakota State University, Home Economics 107, October 1967, page 22.
3. Convenience and the Cost of Food, *Family Economics Review*, June 1971, pages 9-11.
4. Convenience and the Cost of Potatoes and Orange Juice, *Family Economics Review*, September 1971, pages 9-11.

With convenience foods it is possible to make a variety of meals with their help and many possibilities are offered. Convenience foods show combinations of in-season foods with out-of-season products in a processed form.

Convenience foods also offer the extra cool an opportunity to extend the season. In addition to saving convenience foods as they are, the skillful homemaker can add seasonings and other ingredients to produce her own dishes.

Your choice  
Credit experts determine why convenience foods are the best buy for their families. Every consumer interested in convenience foods may find the answer in the following considerations. Your choice depends on the following considerations:

Will the product extend you of work you would rather not do?  
Will the product be of value to you?  
Will the product provide as many nutrients as the fresh product?  
Will the product be of low fat value?  
Will the product be of low fat value?  
Will the product be of low fat value?



Quality of convenience foods  
The quality of convenience foods may be as good as that of nonprocessed foods. The food manufacturer's care, handling, packaging and shipping methods can be assured by reading the label. Food products are fully fortified and enriched with vitamins and minerals. Some products are fortified with vitamins and minerals.

Recent legislation from the food and drug administration requires that all standard-ingredients labels be printed in plain language. Labels should include a list of ingredients and a separate list of other ingredients. This information is printed on the label of each product and is available to the consumer. Labels should include a list of ingredients and a separate list of other ingredients.

Labels  
Labels are an important part of the food label. The information on the label should be of the highest quality. Labels should be printed in plain language. Labels should include a list of ingredients and a separate list of other ingredients.

Food variety  
Convenience foods give the homemaker an opportunity to add interest and variety to their diet. Convenience foods are available in a wide variety of flavors and textures. Labels should include a list of ingredients and a separate list of other ingredients.

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