

CONVENIENCE FOOD

Convenience foods or tertiary processed foods are foods which are designed to save consumers time, reduce wastage from spoilage, and reduce financial costs using economies of scale. These foods require minimum preparation, typically just heating, and are packaged for a long shelf life with little loss of flavour and nutrients over time. They were developed specifically to preserve the oversupply of agricultural products in order to stabilize the food markets in developed countries.

Pros and Cons:-

Consumers are attracted to these products for their:

- Low financial cost. In addition to their low cost price, they negate the need to store fresh food and therefore the likelihood of wastage is significantly lower.
- Low time cost. Convenience foods significantly reduce the time spent shopping for and preparing a meal.
- Variety. Due to packaging techniques such as canning and freezing, foods are available at all times of the year.
- Food safety. Packaging and processing techniques, such as canning, freezing, and irradiation, reduce spoilage and the presence of bacteria in the consumed products.

Convenience foods are often criticized. Reasons for criticism include:-

- They are often high in fat and calorie content, and over consumption of convenience foods are often linked to obesity.
- They may contain Genetically Modified (GMO) foods.
- Foods are sometimes subject to food irradiation, which has a negative public perception.
- Preservatives are almost always used, which also have a negative public perception.

Origin:-

Many point to the feminist movement, unchaining women from the kitchen, as the motivation for the development of these products. Others say it is more likely that urbanization, industrialization, and a reaction to feed the post war population explosion after World War II was the true cause.

However what many overlook are the obvious fact that convenience foods are a very profitable product and their development has been very much marketing lead.

From the manufacturers point of view these products are astounding.

They give:

- Repeat business. Once the meal has been eaten, the customer has to buy another one.
- Long shelf life means that there is little wastage.
- The main ingredients are on the whole very cheap.
- As consumer taste and buying patterns change, the flavour and look of the product can track these changes.

In many cases all that are required is a cosmetic change to the packaging.

Unfortunately, the advantages for the producer do not equate to benefits for the consumer.

The cheap ingredients used are more frequently things like grains and other high carbohydrate ingredients.

Where meat is used it is:

1. Often the cheaper cuts or
2. Mechanically recovered and processed
3. Supplemented or replaced by Soya

This results in the need to use flavour enhancers and other additives in order to make the meal palatable for the consumer.

The same is true for non meat dishes.

The most common convenience foods most folk have come across are the breakfast cereals. Breakfast cereals come in a very wide variety of types from simple cornflakes through to deluxe muesli containing nuts and exotic fruits. These again are made from mainly cheap and nutritionally inferior ingredients that need to have their nutritional value augmented by additives.

Whether convenience foods are good or bad depends on which side of the supply chain fence you are standing on. Manufacturers would say they are good. Not so the independent nutritionist or many consumer groups.

Studies show that by 1965, 27 to 30 percent of US households had significantly incorporated convenience foods into their diets. By the 1990s, convenience foods in the US and UK comprised a large portion of the average diet. In the US, several studies indicate that many families' diets consist entirely of convenience foods and fast food. By the 21st century, nearly every US household uses convenience foods in one form or another.

In addition to breakfast cereals, these food items take many forms. From Kraft Dinner, to whole turkey breasts. The TV dinner is a good example of a convenience food.

Many people in the industrialised world have begun to recognise the detrimental impacts on health resulting from diets which consist largely of nutrient-poor convenience or processed foods. This has contributed to the popularisation of organic food, encouraged some to adopt vegetarianism, and led to the rise of health-focused organisations, such as The Weston A. Price Foundation, which promote the return to traditional diets.

Convenience products - that is, prepared dishes - have been enjoying great popularity for several decades now. Because of advances in food preparation technology, different foods now have a longer shelf-life and a more attractive appearance. 'Convenience' indicates that they satisfy a consumer need: to speed up or even avoid preparation of meals altogether. Prepared foods therefore are at a premium among professional women, singles, people with little cooking experience or sufficient time, and also among the elderly. Even restaurants depend on prepared ingredients when serving large numbers of clients, as this requires less space and allow more rapid processing.

The phrase "convenience food" describes a variety of hot or cold foods and dishes that require little or no effort in preparation. They may be classified according to the level of preparation necessary.

<i>Categories</i>	<i>Example : Potatoes</i>
<i>Fresh raw product</i> Unprocessed product without any preparation	<i>Unpeeled Potatoes</i>
<i>Category 1 : Basic Product</i> The product requires some preparatory steps before cooking.	<i>Peeled Raw Potatoes</i>
<i>Category 2 : Ready to cook Product</i> The product requires no further preparatory steps before cooking.	<i>Peeled Raw Potatoes, Sliced and frozen Oven Fries</i>
<i>Category 3 : Ready to use Product</i> The product must be prepared and perhaps warmed up.	<i>Dehydrated potato puree (In flakes)</i>
<i>Category 4 : Precooked Product</i> This is often a complete dish or menu. It only needs to warmed up before consumption.	<i>Frozen cooked potatoes (Croquettes); Bagged potato pancakes</i>
<i>Category 5 : Table ready Product</i> The product can be consumed immediately.	<i>Chips; potato salad; Complete meal (potatoes, broccoli, meat)</i>

Advantages of prepared foods:-

- These quick and easily-prepared products can save time and require few cooking skills. Vegetables, for example, are already cleaned; washing, peeling, and cutting are unnecessary.
- Convenience products are always available and ready to use.
- The production, storage, and sale of industrially prepared products are subject to strict regulation and controls. Properly stored ready-to-use products are bacteriologically safer than fresh goods. The shelf-life can be extended through additives.
- Modern production techniques and preservation methods minimize the nutritional loss of precooked products. No more vitamins or minerals are lost than in the home kitchen.
- Frozen vegetables have the same nutritional value as fresh products since these foods are frozen immediately after harvesting. Nutrients, vitamins, and the food's sensory-stimulating properties (taste, smell, mouth-feel etc) are in most cases preserved.
- Prepared foods are already divided into portions.
- With suitable supplements, these precooked products are very useful, especially for the elderly, sick, or handicapped persons, or for people who can devote little time to cooking.

Disadvantages of prepared foods:-

- Convenience food often contains a lot of fat so that its energy content is also very high.
- The fat quality may not be good (animal fats). Products with vegetable fats should prefer.
- The salt content is also high. Imported products are usually not prepared with iodized, fluoridated salt. It is therefore important to use correspondingly treated salt for self-prepared foods.
- Most prepared dishes do not provide a full meal. The small amount of vegetables (or their complete absence) contradicts nutritional guidelines. In addition, their content of minerals, vitamins, secondary vegetable materials, and bulk fibres may be inadequate.
- Ready-to-use products are often very expensive.
- People who are allergic or sensitive to certain substances or additives (artificial preservatives, colour additives, taste enhancers) must study the labels very carefully.

Recommendations:-

Currently there is a trend to enrich convenience products with a range of nutrients. The consumer should evaluate such products using the same criteria (listed below) as for dishes without such additives.

Shopping :-

- At most, plan one complete precooked meal per day, and do not fall back on them more than three times a week.
- Preferably select ready-to-use foods, since the ingredients contain less fat and salt. It is critical to compare products by studying the labels:
 - not more than 5 g fat per 100 g of ready-to-use product,
 - or at most 15 g per portion, i.e. 300-400 g per person (protein source and side dishes).
- Buy only products which have their fat content on the label.
- Combine a high-fat convenience dish (e.g. starchy potato pancake) with low-fat foods (protein and vegetables).
- Plan grocery shopping: prepare a list with suitable supplements to the purchased ready-to-use dishes.
- Do not buy anything in damaged packaging.
- Transport frozen and chilled foods in protective bags, take them home as quickly as possible, and place them in the refrigerator or freezer.
- Observe storage instructions.

Preparation

- Cooking temperature and time are essential factors for a successful meal. Follow the manufacturer's instructions.
- Add vegetables and/or fruit to the meal. These may also be in the form of prepared foods: spinach, peas, broccoli, cabbage, carrots, legumes, frozen or preserved mixed vegetables. Bagged raw vegetables: celery, bunch of carrots, green salad, beetroot.
- Vary the products consumed.
- The manufacturer often suggests recipes to improve taste. It's better to ignore these since many of them simply involve the addition of extra fat.
- Water and low-fat ingredients (full or low-fat milk) are best for preparing dehydrated convenience foods (sauces, soups...).

Prepare foods that match your taste: for example, add fresh cabbage and onion to a bagged salad.