

While ingredients in homemade meals may be straightforward, a typical consumer might be unaware of what packaged meals are composed of. Ingredient labels are complicated, often containing many food additives and compounds that may not be familiar to most consumers. If a consumer wants to learn about these ingredients for health concerns or simply to better understand what they're eating, they might find it difficult to determine what specific ingredients to research from just looking at any individual packaged item's ingredients. It is also difficult to generalize any insights gained from such research when it is unclear how prevalent each ingredient is in other foods. In addition to guiding consumers in researching ingredients, food manufacturers may also be interested in the conclusions found in our analysis in determining what ingredients pair well together in other products. We set out to determine the most common ingredients in branded packaged meals to attempt to identify any notable or peculiar patterns that arose from these results, analyzing a subset of the USDA Branded Food Products Database containing only packaged meals to accomplish our goals. Each meal item in the dataset had one of 13 "categories" associated with it, such as "Vegetable Based Products / Meals" or "Frozen Breakfast Sandwiches, Biscuits & Meals", upon which we performed the same analysis. We focused our study on three main components: the most common ingredients in each category, the average number of calories per serving in each category, and relations between ingredients within categories. Within the 13 categories, salt was the most common ingredient in 6, water in 3, and other ingredients in the rest. Salt was the most common ingredient overall, followed by water, sugar, citric acid, and enzymes. The category with the highest average calories per serving is the Ready-Made Combination Meals category, followed closely by the Breakfast Sandwiches, Biscuits & Meals category. This analysis could prove beneficial to consumers and producers alike, and could be beneficial in research moving forward.