**Day 17**

**Title: Toss the Box and Reach for Fresh Foods**

In the previous two articles, we’ve talked about salt and sugar. Specifically, how those of us eating Western-style diets tend to eat WAY too much for our own good. The problem is not that we’re adding spoonfuls of sugar to our breakfast cereal or that we’re always reaching for the salt shaker. If that were the case, it would be much easier to reduce our intake. Cutting back is so difficult because the majority of extra sugar and salt we eat comes from processed and other pre-packaged foods.

Over the past few decades, we have experienced a dramatic rise in the number of pre-packaged and processed foods. In some regards, having an abundance of ready-to-eat or heat-and-eat foods is a good thing. It made food more easily available and transportable. When people didn’t have to spend a long time cooking each meal, they had freedom to do other things. But processed foods came with a cost. To keep foods looking and tasting good after months on a grocery shelf or freezer, food manufacturers often add a lot of sugar, salt, and other additives.

**What are processed foods?**

Almost all foods go through some sort of processing. Take milk, for example. Milk is a natural food. Even with pasteurization, the milk hasn’t changed much. Now turn that milk into cheese, and you’ve processed it slightly. Turn that cheese into the cheese that comes out of a spray can, and you have a highly processed food. If we compare the food labels for each of these foods, we can see the difference in levels of processing. Just look at the number of ingredients. Milk has one ingredient. Cheese has a few recognizable ingredients. But the spray can cheese has close to 15.

**How do I identify processed foods?**

There are a few ways to identify processed foods. Sometimes, you can rely on your intuition. Canned soups, frozen dinners and pizzas, cookies, crackers, anything with the word “instant,” and sugary or salty snacks all fit the bill. Other times, take a look at the ingredient list. How many ingredients does the food have? How many of those ingredients are unfamiliar to you? Are any of them difficult (or impossible) to pronounce? The more complicated the ingredients list, the more processed the food is.

**Why should I limit processed foods?**

Processed foods are not necessarily off limits, but choose lightly processed foods over highly processed ones as much as possible. As you get further away from the natural food ingredients, you lose much of the nutrition. For example, whole-grain crackers are processed foods, but eaten in moderation, they can be a tasty and healthy snack. Regular crackers made from refined flour, though, are probably something you should have only rarely.

**A final word**

In a perfect world, we would all eat freshly prepared, home cooked meals every day. But we don’t live in a perfect world, and sometimes processed foods are the best alternative. Not all processed foods are unhealthy, but most have extra sugar and sodium and fewer vitamins and minerals than a homemade version would. If you eat processed foods occasionally, this isn’t a problem. But when highly processed foods make up the majority of your diet, all that extra sugar and salt add up, and you may wind up deficient in much needed nutrients.

When buying processed foods, read the food label. Watch how much sugar is added and pay attention to the % Daily Value of sodium (5% or less is a low sodium food and 20% or more is a high sodium food). Buy breads with “whole grain” in the ingredients list. With a little investigation and willingness to be choosy, you can keep highly processed foods to a small portion of your balanced diet.

**Sources:**

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