

FOOD BASKET

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Following our earlier discussions regarding processed foods, we created a basket of 30 most frequently purchased (mostly packaged) foods and arranged them in order of decreasing level of ultra-processing. Then we split the list in the middle, and called the group of first 15, “Highly Processed” group and the second group (16-30) a “Minimally Processed” group.

Then we obtained some information in three areas: nutrition, health, and cost. Although the results were not surprising, the specific insights seem to be useful.

A less anticipated and highly consequential results of the analysis of the data were in the two groups’ costs: healthy diet is way more expensive.

This will be a challenge to the incoming Trump administration running a program, “Make America healthy Again”, especially to HHS headed by Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

But the outcome is worth a good fight, RFK and Trump!

“HIGHLY PROCESSED” GROUP

1. Frozen Dinners (Highly processed with preservatives, artificial flavors, and additives for extended shelf life and convenience)
2. Frozen Pizza (Contains processed meats, cheese, artificial ingredients, and preservatives)
3. Snack Chips (Deeply processed with artificial flavors, colors, and preservatives)
4. Packaged Cookies (Often contain high amounts of sugar, artificial flavors, colors, and preservatives)
5. Instant Noodles (Highly processed with added flavor enhancers, salt, and preservatives)
6. Breakfast Cereals (Many are highly processed with added sugars, artificial flavors, and preservatives, although some healthier options exist)
7. Sausages or Hot Dogs (Cured meats containing nitrates, salt, and flavor enhancers)
8. Bacon (Cured with preservatives such as nitrates and often contains added sugar or flavorings)
9. Packaged Deli Meats (Processed with preservatives, salt, and flavor enhancers)
10. Canned Soups (Contain artificial flavors, preservatives, and high sodium content)
11. Jarred Pasta Sauces (Processed with preservatives, salt, and flavoring agents)
12. Packaged Cheese (Processed cheese often includes stabilizers, emulsifiers, and preservatives)
13. Peanut Butter (Commercial brands may contain added sugars, hydrogenated oils, and preservatives)
14. Breakfast Granola Bars (Often include added sugars, preservatives, and emulsifiers)
15. Canned Tuna (May include preservatives or flavor enhancers, though minimally processed otherwise)

“MINIMALLY PROCESSED” GROUP

16. Flavored Yogurt (Contains added sugars or artificial sweeteners, colors, and flavors)
17. Milk (Minimally processed; pasteurized and often homogenized but without additives in plain versions)

18. Fresh Meat (Beef, Pork, Chicken) (Minimally processed, may be packaged but without added fillers or preservatives)
19. Ground Beef (Fresh but can sometimes contain fillers or preservatives if not labeled "100% beef")
20. Chicken Breast (Packaged) (Usually fresh or frozen, but some may be treated with sodium solutions or preservatives)
21. Frozen Vegetables (Preserved through freezing, typically no added ingredients)
22. Canned Vegetables (Preserved with salt or additives, but still closer to natural food)
23. Pasta (Dry pasta is processed but typically contains just flour and water with minimal additives)
24. Sliced Bread (Contains preservatives and, in many cases, added sugar for taste and longer shelf life)
25. Packaged Nuts (Minimally processed, often roasted and salted)
26. Eggs (Natural, minimally processed, typically sold in cartons for protection)
27. Butter (Minimally processed, made from cream, often salted for preservation)
28. Rice (Minimally processed, sold as white or whole-grain options)
29. Potatoes (Typically fresh and unprocessed, though packaged for convenience)
30. Fresh Fruits (e.g., Apples, Bananas) (Unprocessed, often pre-packaged for easy handling and storage)

1. So, our first question was: Will the Highly Processed (Group 1) foods provide a fully balanced diet (in terms of nutrition, not health)?

The Highly Processed group (1–15) includes:

- Frozen Dinners, Frozen Pizza, Snack Chips, Packaged Cookies, Instant Noodles, Breakfast Cereals, Sausages, Bacon, Packaged Deli Meats, Canned Soups, Jarred Pasta Sauces, Packaged Cheese, Peanut Butter, Granola Bars, Canned Tuna.

Analysis:

- Proteins: Provided by sausages, bacon, deli meats, canned tuna, peanut butter, and packaged cheese.
- Carbohydrates: Supplied by breakfast cereals, instant noodles, frozen dinners, frozen pizza, granola bars, and cookies.
- Fats: Found in bacon, sausages, peanut butter, snack chips, and packaged cheese.
- Vitamins and Minerals: Minimal contributions from canned soups, jarred pasta sauces, and breakfast cereals (fortified).

Conclusion:

The Highly Processed group provides basic macronutrients (proteins, carbs, fats) but lacks a broad spectrum of vitamins, minerals, and dietary fiber due to the absence of fresh fruits, vegetables, and whole foods. While it can technically sustain nutrition, it is far from balanced.

2. Our second question was: Will the Minimally Processed (Group 2) foods provide a fully balanced diet (in terms of nutrition, not health)?

The Minimally Processed group (16–30) includes:

- Flavored Yogurt, Milk, Fresh Meat, Ground Beef, Chicken Breast, Frozen Vegetables, Canned Vegetables, Pasta, Sliced Bread, Packaged Nuts, Eggs, Butter, Rice, Potatoes, Fresh Fruits.

Analysis:

- Proteins: Supplied by fresh meat, ground beef, chicken breast, eggs, milk, and nuts.
- Carbohydrates: Provided by pasta, bread, rice, potatoes, and fresh fruits.
- Fats: Found in butter, nuts, milk, and some meats.

- Vitamins and Minerals: Significant contributions from frozen vegetables, canned vegetables, fresh fruits, milk, and eggs.

Conclusion:

The Minimally Processed group offers all necessary macronutrients and a more comprehensive range of vitamins and minerals. It provides a balanced diet in terms of nutrition, although variety could still be improved.

3. Our first question was: Are we correct in assuming that the Minimally Processed (Group 2) foods will provide a healthier diet?

Yes, our assumption was correct.

- Minimally Processed foods (Group 2) are healthier because they are lower in added sugars, unhealthy fats, sodium, and artificial ingredients. They also retain more natural nutrients, fiber, and antioxidants.
- Highly Processed foods (Group 1), while sufficient for survival, are associated with long-term health risks such as obesity, cardiovascular diseases, and diabetes due to their high levels of additives, sugars, and unhealthy fats.

4. Finally, we asked, "What would be a monthly cost of a 2500-calories diet for the "Highly Processed" and "Minimally Processed" groups?

Here are the results.

Monthly Cost of a 2500-Calorie Diet for Each Group

Highly Processed (Group 1)

- Caloric density: Highly processed foods are calorie-dense but nutritionally sparse.
- Estimated daily cost: \$6–\$8 per day.
- Monthly cost: \$180–\$240.

Minimally Processed (Group 2)

- Caloric density: Minimally processed foods are nutrient-dense but require larger quantities to meet calorie needs.
- Estimated daily cost: \$8–\$12 per day.
- Monthly cost: \$240–\$360.

Summary Table

Group	Balanced Diet?	Healthier?	Daily Cost	Monthly Cost
Highly Processed	No	No	\$6–\$8	\$180–\$240
Minimally Processed	Yes	Yes	\$8–\$12	\$240–\$360

Key Insights

- The Minimally Processed group is not only healthier but also provides a nutritionally balanced diet, though at a higher cost.
- The Highly Processed group is less expensive and calorie-dense but nutritionally inadequate and poses significant health risks.