FACTSHEET No. 28

PROCESSED FOOD AND BREAD

What are Processed Foods?

Very few foods are edible without some form of processing.

Processing can range from peeling and boiling potatoes to making a 'ready meal' ready for heating in a microwave.

Processing as such does not make a food good or bad, healthy or unhealthy. It is the inherent properties of the food and type of processing it may go through that would result in that food's particular attributes.

Processing and the extent of the processing is not a measure of the healthiness or un-healthiness of a food.

Bread and Processed Foods

Bread is often described as a processed food. Grains for bread, typically from wheat, have to be milled into flour. The flour has to be mixed with other ingredients to make a dough and the dough then baked to make bread. Any food cooked, baked and prepared in a similar way could also be described as processed.

That processing does not make the bread healthy or unhealthy.

If it has too much salt added it may be described as unhealthy. Otherwise the bread that is made in this way, be it large scale or small scale, are all processed. So processed is not the way to describe a healthy or an unhealthy food.

Flour which has been fortified with nutrients improves the nutritional benefits of the products made from that flour. This could also be described as processing.

Processed Food Classification

The interest in processed foods was highlighted by the Nova Classification of Foods which highlighted 'ultra-processed foods' as those foods that have five or more ingredients and/or contain additives or particular ingredients. The Nova Classification System does not take into account the nutrient content of foods, only the level of processing. According to the Nova Classification System ultra-processed foods are defined as those that have been manufactured with five or more ingredients and/or contain additives or particular ingredients. Therefore the ultra-processed category would include a wide range of foods including items such as confectionery, sugar-

sweetened drinks that are not considered a necessary part of a healthy diet as they contain high levels of fat, sugar and also salt, along with foods such as fruit, yoghurts, wholegrain manufactured breads, high fibre fortified breakfast cereals, packaged soups based on vegetables and beans and tomato based pasta sauces that are often part of a healthy dietary patterns.

Conversely some foods that might be classed in the less processed categories are those that should be limited in the diet, for example: sugar and salt (Category 2 – processed culinary ingredients), and foods such as salted nuts and fruit in syrup (Category 3 – processed foods defined as relatively simple products).

There is also inconsistency in areas of classification for example the Nova Categorisation and the Nutri Score System are not consistent.

The conclusion is that the Nova System is not a good measure of dietary advice. It is important to consider all the attributes of the different foods, their nutritional content and how they impact on our health.