With today's busy lifestyles, who couldn't use a hand getting a healthful meal on the table?

Thanks to modern food production and processing, many fast, affordable and flavorful options are as close as your local grocer.

Foods to Fit Your Busy Lifestyle

Four Ways Food Processing Makes Fast-Paced Living Easier

Food processing brings us convenient and nutritious options to make meal preparation quick and easy for individuals or families of any size. Here are four ways processed foods can help:

1. When time is short, you can put a "ready-to-eat" or heat-and-serve meal on the table in minutes.

2. Stocking up on frozen, canned and packaged foods means they're fresh and ready when you need them (such as on a night when you get home from work late or have to pick up the kids from soccer practice). These foods are often more affordable, too. Examples include frozen vegetables, canned beans and soups, and instant rice.

3. You can buy the package size that suits you – from those that provide multiple servings to single servings that cut down on food waste.

4. Food packaging innovations such as bagged fruits and vegetables and heat-and-eat soup cups help make nutritious foods more convenient.
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**Trim Prep Time Around-the-Clock**
Food processing helps you shave precious minutes – and sometimes hours – from meal and snack preparation time.

For instance, the ingredients for a stir-fry (broccoli, carrots, onions, fresh herbs, etc.) can take a long time to slice and chop, but you can get the job done in less than 30 minutes – including the cooking. How? Use ingredients such as packaged chicken breast strips, bagged precut broccoli florets, canned baby corn and sliced water chestnuts, bottled low-sodium soy sauce, and microwavable instant brown rice. Or, simply buy a bag of frozen stir-fry with sauce, empty into a pan, and read your mail or quiz the kids on their homework while your meal heats.

Check out these other time-saving ideas:

**Breakfast is a Breeze**
- Instead of cooking, dig into a bowl of ready-to-eat cereal or instant oatmeal topped with fat-free milk and chopped dried apricots.
- Layer peanut butter and sliced banana on toasted frozen waffles for a hearty and nutritious morning meal. Drizzle with maple syrup for a special treat.
- As you head out the door, grab a container of low-fat yogurt and a 100% fruit juice box for breakfast at your desk.

**Lunch is in the Bag**
- Sandwiches are fast and can be different every day thanks the variety of sliced breads (white, whole-wheat, rye, sourdough, etc.), meats (turkey, ham, roast beef, etc.), and cheeses (Cheddar, Swiss, Muenster, provolone, etc.). Layer on pre-washed bagged lettuce, fresh tomato slices and jarred pickle slices. Mix up your condiments, too – use low-fat mayo one day, spiced mustard the next.
- Single-serving bags of sliced apples, baby carrots and baked potato or corn chips are handy for lunches.
- Tote a meal kit containing hummus, crackers and dried fruit, along with a diet beverage.

**Dinner in a Dash**
- Swing by the supermarket for prepared and easy-to-make foods: Make an easy, nutritious meal from Rotisserie chicken, instant rice or potatoes, canned green beans, crusty bread, and angel food cake with frozen strawberries.
- Heat up hearty canned soup or chili in minutes. Round out the meal with a salad using bagged spinach tossed with bottled light salad dressing plus packaged whole-wheat rolls.
- To trim time, toss diced canned tomatoes, canned beans or frozen veggies into soups, stews, casseroles and pasta sauces instead of fresh.

**Speedy Snacks**
- Stash items such as cereal or granola bars, boxes of raisins or dried cranberries, and single-serving bags of roasted nuts or pretzels in your backpack, purse or desk drawer.
- Stock the home or office fridge with reduced-fat string cheese, fruit cups, low-fat yogurt and sugar-free pudding.

For more information about modern food production and processing, please visit: [http://www.foodinsight.org/understandingourfood.aspx](http://www.foodinsight.org/understandingourfood.aspx)