

The dark side of processed food

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On a cold wintry night, the man who cooks meals for my family was down with a cold. Experience showed that my stint in the [kitchen](#) could slay even the strongest stomachs. So I set out to the market, looking for safe options to "cook". That's when I discovered read-to-eat meat products: hams, sausages, bacon and salami waiting to be defrosted and slapped on a sandwich or popped into a sizzling pan. And since my gym instructor had told me to take it a notch up with proteins, it seemed like the perfect solution. Little did I

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know that those hours I spent in the gym trying to lose weight were being wasted, one five-minute meal at a time.

World over, consumers are moving away from processed **food** - meat in particular. Those in developed nations worry about their carbon footprint, which increases because of the meat processing function, packaging and transportation. In India, this shunning of processed meat seems to emerge from increasing consciousness about health. "People are moving away from all processed **food** because of the harmful effects that additives, such as preservatives, have on their bodies," says Vivek Raj, director, department of gastroenterology and hepatology, **Max Super Speciality Hospital** in New Delhi's Saket. In that sense, isn't all processed **food** harmful? "All foods go through some process or the other, but not all of it is harmful. For example, milk pasteurisation is healthy, but adding flavour and preservatives to meat is not entirely so," explains Raj.

The further a **food** product moves away from its natural state, the lesser its health benefits. Meat processing often involves the use of nitrites and nitrates as preservatives. These are known to cause certain kinds of malignancies. Besides preservatives, processed meat is also believed to contain high fat and salt (sodium). While high fat content leads to obesity and cholesterol disorders, high sodium leads to fluid retention in the body, kidney and cardiac disorders and high blood pressure. Preservatives and additives can also trigger migraine episodes among those who are prone to frequent headaches. "Another common additive is cornstarch, which is nothing but concentrated carbohydrates with no nutrient value," says Raj. Carbohydrates are mostly converted into fat by the body and lead to weight gain.

Sunita Roy Chowdhury, chief dietician at New Delhi's BLK Super Speciality Hospital, urges her patients to change to a vegetable-heavy diet. "Red meat, whether processed or not, is anyway harmful because it contains no fibre and high levels of saturated fat. It is then easier to stay healthy with a vegetarian diet, especially one that is rich in fibre," she says. For regular meat-eaters, she suggests that they at least switch to white meat, like fish and chicken. "Processed meat must be avoided as much as possible. We don't know what really goes into them and even if they aren't fried, they are very high in saturated fats." As an alternative, she recommends grilling or making a stew with chicken or fish, which will help the meat lose its natural fat content too.

While protein is an important component in maintaining body weight, both Raj and Chowdhury suggest that one does not need more than one to two grams per kilo of body weight of protein per day. "This means that a person who is around five feet tall only needs to get about 50 grams of protein every day," explains Chowdhury.

So with such side-effects, does this spell doom for sellers and consumers of processed meat? Ravi Chopra,

senior manager at Delhi-based Green Chick Chop, disagrees. "Yes, sausages and bacon are high in fat, but this is not true for all processed meat," he says. According to him, chicken ham is perhaps the healthiest way to eat chicken, even healthier than chicken cooked at home. "We use a certain ratio of salt and fat and try to achieve healthier standards. You never know how much oil or salt you use for home recipes," he counters. Chopra also explains that as recipes vary at home, different manufacturers use different ratios of ingredients for their products. For example, when meat producers add monosodium glutamate, it improves flavour but also greatly increases the level of sodium. He defends the use of preservatives as a mere process to keep the food safe and bacteria-free. Pune-based Venky's, a major producer of processed meats, was unavailable for comment. Of course, packaged meat products do follow government health standards, else they would not be allowed for sale. In other words, the key is not complete avoidance, but moderation.