

# 10 Surprisingly Healthy Packaged Foods

## *Convenient Can Also Be Healthy!*

-- By Sarah Haan, Registered Dietitian - SparkPeople

You've probably heard this advice before: For a healthy grocery trip, shop the perimeter of the store. Avoiding the middle aisles is a good tactic to help you make great choices and pick the most nutritious foods, but if you stick to this advice completely you'll be missing out on some of the nutritious items that *do* come in packages. These packaged foods—not to be confused with "processed" foods—can give you some great nutrients and [make meal planning easier](#), saving you precious time.

You can feel good about buying some boxed, canned and jarred items when you're equipped with the right information. Understanding what you're looking for is the first step to healthy choices within the supermarket aisles.

Here's a list of the healthiest convenience foods you can buy from the center of the grocery store.

### **Canned Beans**

Though dried beans are cheaper than canned, they can take a lot of time to cook. Canned beans pack an impressive amount of fiber and protein and can be a [quick addition to many meals](#). Pinto, kidney, cannellini (white kidney), black, Great Northern—name any bean, they're all great sources of nutrition for your body. When you're choosing your beans, look for ones without added salt or seasoning. Before using your beans, drain and rinse them in a colander when you're ready to cook. This will help wash added sodium down the drain--40% of the sodium to be exact.

### **Oats and Flaxseed**

Prepare to have a heart-healthy breakfast by combining old-fashioned oats and ground flaxseed, both found packaged in either cartons or bags. One cup of cooked oatmeal with 2 tablespoons of ground flaxseed will give you 8 grams of much needed fiber, as well as a dose of [omega-3 fatty acids](#), which each protect the heart. Choose old-fashioned oats over quick oats or instant oatmeal to ensure you're getting the maximum amount of fiber without added salt and sugar.

### **Frozen Vegetables**

These can be nearly as nutritious as fresh and are conveniently prewashed and chopped. To ensure you're getting the maximum amount of vitamins and minerals available, use the vegetables within a few weeks as some nutrients may begin to degrade over time. Also, steam or microwave your veggies rather than boiling them to make sure you're not losing water-soluble vitamins. Grab some edamame for a nutrient-packed snack, heat up some chopped broccoli as a side dish or combine a stir-fry mix with shrimp in a shallow pan and heat with a bit of olive or canola oil.

### **Frozen Berries**

When it comes to meeting your daily fruit requirement, you can't beat frozen. Many frozen berries do not have added sugar, but some do. Double check that the ingredients list contains berries to make sure you're not getting extra calories from refined sugars. Then, add them to oatmeal, cereal, yogurt or make a smoothie.

### **Granola Bars**

This one can be tricky, as not every granola bar is good for you. Shop carefully and read labels to pick out the healthiest option. Be cautious not to fall into an advertising trap! Flip the products over and check out the ingredients. Some of the healthiest bars will be found near the products made for athletes or in the "natural foods" section. Brands that use dates as their main sweetener can give you a good amount of fiber. Some of these higher quality bars do have more calories. Consider splitting one in half for a small snack or share it with a friend.

### **Soups**

[Soup that comes in a can or carton](#) can be a healthy choice if you shop carefully. Many are packed with plenty of fat and added sodium, but some brands are lighter in both. A non-condensed, organic soup made with real vegetables is going to be the healthiest option. These are sometimes found in cans near the condensed soups but

are also packaged in boxes in a separate section. Watch out for high sodium soups and read labels for serving size. Most people eat a whole can of soup as one serving, only to discover that what they thought was a healthy option actually contained 2.5 to 3 times the calories, fat and sodium!

### **Cereal**

Breakfast cereal can be a toss-up. Either you're eating an overdose of sugar or you're getting a good amount of fiber and vitamins. [Pick the right cereal](#), and you'll be supporting your heart and intestinal health with each bite. Look for at least 5 grams of fiber per serving and keep in mind the amount of added sugar. There isn't an established limit to an amount of sugar to stay under, but if you aim for about 5 grams or less, you're usually grabbing a healthy cereal. You can add even more fiber by mixing in some plain bran cereal with your favorite lightly sweetened cereal.

### **Brown Rice**

For a boxed fare that is both versatile and nutrient packed, pick up brown rice on your next grocery trip. This fiber-rich grain is a great side for nearly any meat, bean, and vegetable--or combination of all three! Try it with kidney beans, diced tomatoes and cilantro, or top it with shrimp, steamed carrots and broccoli with your favorite low-sodium sauce. Learn more about the [benefits of whole grains](#) and [how to cook them](#).

### **Tuna Fish Packed in Water**

When it comes to getting a bang for your buck out of canned food, this is almost as good as it gets. This convenient food is high in [omega-3 fatty acids](#) and protein, and also gives you a good amount of vitamins D and B-12, too. Top a bed of greens with tuna, veggies, fruit and nuts or scoop it onto whole wheat pita, crackers or bread for a healthy combo on-the-go.

### **Yogurt**

This tangy concoction found in the dairy aisle can be a great snack or breakfast staple. There are so many options you could go cross-eyed looking at the cooler full of colorful packages! Many brands are advertising "natural" products that do not have artificial colors or sweeteners, but what you choose should depend on your own preferences and nutritional goals. Make sure you check the label for calories to ensure you meet your daily goal. [Learn how to pick the healthiest yogurt](#).

Dana Gray, B.S., ACE-GFI  
RAMC Health Educator