

Ready Made Meals

Convenience meals that you pop in the microwave or in the oven are big business. Two thirds of UK households buy chilled ready-made meals at least once a week. We spend £200 million a year on pasta sauces alone! The variety of ready-made meals available speaks for itself, just look at the number of shelves devoted to them in any supermarket – a booming business. Our lifestyles simply do not allow us enough time to prepare meals from scratch and also more disposable income is available to spend on convenience foods. It's not all doom and gloom though, there is no reason a diet containing ready-made meals can't be healthy. It is important to choose carefully and add plenty of unprocessed plant-based foods.

1. Some pitfalls

Common gripes about ready meals are the inconsistency in portions you get. Different manufacturers have different ideas about how much a portion should weigh. The weight of a portion can vary by as much as 200 g from one brand to another.

The average ready meal costs several pounds for a full meal for one, but higher prices don't always mean better quality or tastier dishes.

So are you getting value for your money? Possibly not. Many products contain far too much fat and salt to be healthy. So, how do you pick the good from the bad?

The only reliable way to avoid the pitfalls of convenience foods is to read the labels. Fat and sodium are the two main figures to look at. As a rough guide:

Fat:

- Under 10g fat in the **whole meal** could be regarded as a low fat meal
- Between 10-20g fat is medium
- Over 20g is quite high

Sodium:

- Look at the per 100 g column
- A healthy option has 0.1 – 0.3 g salt per 100g
- A high salt product contains over 0.5 g per 100g

2. To add balance to a ready-made meal

Convenience meals are rarely nutritionally balanced by themselves.

- If the meal is meat-based with no added carbohydrate, add your own, for example boiled potatoes, wholegrain rice or wholemeal bread
- Most dishes, even vegetarian dishes will benefit from at least one or two portions of additional vegetables to add fibre and reduce the calorie density of the meal
- Quick choices of vegetables include frozen vegetables e.g. peas or sweetcorn or a bowl of ready-prepared salad from a bag.
- Ready made meals that are fish, pasta or vegetable-based (as long as they are not laden with butter or cream) tend to be a good choice.
- Tomato-based sauces are lower in fat and calories than the creamier and cheese sauces e.g. go for spaghetti arrabiata than spaghetti carbonara

- Ready-made pizzas with extra-added vegetable toppings are not a bad choice. Avoid the meaty pizzas; they are high in fat and salty meats are often used.
- Ready-meals labeled and claiming they are “low-fat” have to contain three percent fat or less. Most supermarkets now have a “healthy-eating logo”, which indicates that the product should have controlled levels of salt, sugar and fats.

Here are some suggestions for super-quick “real” food:

- Ready-chopped vegetables and chicken for a fast stirfry
- Microwave individual fish portions and serve with microwaved jacket potatoes and frozen vegetables
- Cook fresh pasta (it only takes two minutes) and serve it with a tomato based sauce
- A tin of sardines on toast with packet salad

Also, enjoy a piece of fresh fruit for a healthy dessert!