

Fresh Thinking: Better Protein Options for Health

This resource offers ideas and tips on how to enjoy more fresh, wholesome options in place of processed meats. Through small changes and simple swaps, you can make a big impact on your health.

What are processed meats?

Processed meats are any meats that have been transformed through salting, curing, fermentation, smoking, or other processes to enhance flavour or improve preservation. They contain high levels of salt and other harmful chemicals.



How much is too much?

Aim to limit your intake of red and processed meat to 50-70 grams a day (350-500 grams a week).

Easy tips to get started

- Eat very little, if any, processed meats.
- Limit unprocessed red meats to a small portion 2-3 times a week. A portion is 50-75 grams or half the size of your palm.
- Choose lean varieties and trim excess fat.

There's no known safe level of processed meat consumption for cancer prevention.

(World Cancer Research Fund, 2018)

Practical tips to introduce processed-meat-free days



- Take a **gradual approach**. Small swaps help staff get used to longer-term changes.
- If you are planning to implement a processed-meat-free day, **conduct a staff survey** to find out what days of the week the staff would prefer to have no processed meats available. Midweek often works best because there is less demand for cooked breakfasts those days.
- **Speak to catering staff in similar healthcare sites** that have successfully introduced processed-meat-free days. Contact the Irish Heart Foundation for more information.
- **Give plenty of notice and information to staff** about changes to the menu by displaying fliers and posters.
- **Create excitement and promote the positives** around new menus or healthier items on offer rather than what is being limited. See our [Keeping Healthy Eating on the Agenda](#) and [Strategies to Encourage Healthy Choices](#) supports for more information.
- **Always include a source of protein** in all vegetarian dishes, for example, beans, chickpeas, lentils, peas, soya mince, Quorn™, eggs, nuts or seeds.

Menu ideas and examples

Breakfast

■ **Increase the variety of plant-based options** offered in the traditional cooked breakfast. For example:

- baked beans
- poached eggs
- grilled tomatoes
- sautéed mushrooms
- grilled asparagus
- sautéed spinach
- baked hashbrowns
- wholegrain toast
- grilled turkey – or plant-based sausages (see below)

■ Some sausage alternatives can be used in small amounts as substitutes for pork sausages. For example, sausages that contain turkey mince or soya protein with just salt, spices and herbs.

Try to limit sausage and rasher products that are ultra-processed and high in salt, saturated fat, and contain ingredients that you would not normally find in a domestic kitchen, for example, nitrates, dextrose, sulphites and other preservatives and emulsifiers.



■ On processed-meat-free days, consider offering an alternative hot breakfast 'special', for example:

- shakshuka
- spicy moroccan eggs
- smoky mushroom and potato hash
- omelette of the day
- black bean breakfast burrito
- green eggs with spinach and pesto
- turkish breakfast eggs
- crêpes or pancakes

Sandwich and salad bar

- Swap reconstituted turkey and chicken for homecooked versions.
- If ham is available, offer plenty of unprocessed alternatives, like cold salmon and homecooked chicken.
- Limit salami and other processed meats.



Lunch and evening meals

■ Consider swapping processed meat for unprocessed meat or plant-based alternatives, for example:

Swap from	To
Baked ham with boiled cabbage and potatoes	• Roast chicken with two vegetables and potatoes
Ultra-processed beef burgers	• Homemade grilled lean beef burgers • Homemade herby fish burgers or spicy bean burgers
Deep-fried ultra-processed chicken nuggets	• Homemade baked chicken goujons made with fresh chicken breast and wholegrain breadcrumbs
Sausage ragu	• Grilled skinless chicken breasts in a sticky barbeque sauce • Pork and apple rissoles • Smoky aubergine tagine