

Cool Convenience

The chilly truth about frozen entrees

by MADELEINE GREY

Tara Weir of Toronto doesn't avoid the chilliest section of the supermarket, but she does pick and choose carefully. Weir is more conscientious about reading labels when buying for one-year-old Ben, who loves it when she thaws out frozen organic blueberries or blackberries for breakfast. "We eat frozen pizzas," she says, but they watch out for trans fats. Ditto for chicken nuggets.

What can't be found frozen these days? From baby food to moussaka, the frozen-food industry is as hearty as a Swanson Hungry Man dinner.

"There's big growth in frozen entrees," confirms Kim McKinnon of the Canadian Council of Grocery Distributors in Toronto. In 2005, the frozen-entree category alone tallied up \$1.2 billion in sales in Canada — a five percent increase over the previous year.

For family meals, this can mean boon or bust. On the positive side, frozen fruits and vegetables offer convenience, good nutrition and, depending on the season, a better price. But heavy reliance on frozen main dishes concerns Toronto dietitian Carol Dombrow, of the Heart and Stroke Foundation. The reason? Frozen dinners can be high in fat and sodium, says Dombrow, and "don't always contain a lot of vegetables." (For healthy amounts of fat and sodium, see "Check These Stats," p. 56.)

Some typical examples:

- Pot pies are prime targets, due to that flaky crust (high in saturated fat and made with either lard or hydrogenated oils) and luxurious filling. One 250 g (8 oz) serving of PC Turkey



Sure, they're quick, convenient and tasty, but when it comes to delivering good nutrition, frozen entrees don't always stack up. Compare labels before you buy.

Pie contains 635 calories, 35 g fat and 773 mg sodium.

- Most lasagnas can be a healthy choice — except that they may be swimming in sodium. A 250 g (8 oz) serving of Compliments Meat Lasagna has 270 calories, 6 g total fat, 0 g trans fat — but a whopping 1300 mg sodium.

- Go easy on the pizza too. A single serving of McCain Crescendo Rising Crust Deluxe Pizza (about a fifth of the pizza) chalks up 370 calories, 17 g fat, 2 g trans fat and 940 mg sodium.

Still, it is possible to buy frozen and eat healthy — just keep some cool tips in mind.

Outsource veggies. Dombrow suggests supplementing any frozen main course with a salad or sliced raw vegetables. "Look at your plate when serving a lasagna or shepherd's pie. The frozen entree covers your grain and protein portions; now fill out the other half of the plate with vegetables."

Size it up. Get savvy about label reading — starting with the serving size. A Nutrition Facts label may be based on one-sixth of a pizza or one-eighth of a lasagna tray. While that may be a realistic portion for a six-year-old, it's unlikely to satisfy a ravenous teen.

"Remember that all the nutrition information is based on the serving

Check These Stats

The Heart and Stroke Foundation's Health Check program helps take the confusion out of shopping. When a frozen entree meets the program's healthy criteria for fat, protein and sodium levels, it can display the Health Check logo — a veritable stamp of approval. Here are Heart and Stroke's criteria to help you judge labels.

■ A 250 g serving of a frozen entree should have no more than 15 g of total fat and 960 mg of sodium, and 10 g or more of protein.

■ A 250 g serving of pizza should have no more than 17 g of total fat and 960 mg of sodium, and 10 g or more of protein.

■ A 140 g serving of vegetarian or meat pie should have no more than 15 g of fat and 480 mg sodium, and 10 g or more of protein.

Good bets:

■ The Heart and Stroke Health Check logo is on six of Stouffer's frozen entrees, 12 Commensal individual frozen meals and Sobeys' Compliments Balance.

■ Look for PC Blue Menu products that are low in fat and sodium.

■ Look for lower-fat frozen pizzas that contain at least 25 percent less fat than regular, such as Kraft Delissio Harvest Wheat Rising Crust.

■ Lean meatballs and extra-lean shepherd's pie are a healthier choice than regular.

size. Be realistic about how much you plan to eat or serve. If it's twice the amount stated in the serving size, double all the numbers to know what you are eating," explains Dombrow. "Sometimes manufacturers cheat and say a product will serve four to six people but, in reality, it is only good for two to three servings."

Think about it. Finding healthy selections in your store's freezer cases is really about common sense. You know that frozen veggies, marinated chicken breasts and fish fillets are going to be better choices than foods high in saturated fats such as pizza, which most children prefer in the four cheese or pepperoni editions. A single serving of Michelina's Zap'em's Pepperoni Pizza Snacks, for instance, has 410

Tex-Mex Shepherd's Pie

Give this family standard a makeover with chili-powder-infused ground turkey and a golden, sweet potato topping. Bonus: This recipe makes two casseroles — one for now and one for the freezer!

6	medium sweet potatoes (about 3½ lb/1.75 kg)
6 tbsp (90 mL)	butter
1 cup (250 mL)	milk
½ tsp (2 mL)	cinnamon
¼ tsp (1 mL)	freshly ground black pepper
2 tsp (10 mL)	salt
1 tbsp (15 mL)	vegetable oil
1	cooking onion, chopped
3 lb (1.5 kg)	ground turkey
4 tsp (20 mL)	chili powder
2 tsp (10 mL)	cumin
¼–1 tsp (1–5 mL)	cayenne
¼ cup (50 mL)	all-purpose flour
½ cup (125 mL)	tomato paste
2 cups (500 mL)	low-sodium chicken stock
1 cup (250 mL)	frozen corn

The Dish on Portions

calories	380
protein	24 g
fat	17.4 g
carbohydrates	32.5 g
fibre	4.2 g
iron	20%*
vitamin A	218%*
vitamin C	45%*

*of recommended daily amount

Preheat oven to 425°F (220°C). Pierce sweet potatoes with a fork and bake on a foil-lined baking sheet for 1 hour or until soft and tender. Let cool. Peel away skins. Meanwhile, in a medium pot, melt 4 tbsp butter on low. Turn off heat. Add sweet potatoes, milk, cinnamon, ½ of the black pepper and 1 tsp of the salt. Mash until smooth.

In a large, non-stick pan, heat oil at medium high, add onion and cook 3 minutes or until soft. Add ground turkey, and season with the remaining black pepper and salt, chili powder, cumin and cayenne. Cook until no longer pink — about 8 minutes. In a small bowl, whisk together flour with ¼ cup (75 mL) water. Add flour mixture, tomato paste, chicken stock and frozen corn to pan. Bring to a boil, reduce to simmer and cook another 5 minutes.

Fill a 9 in. (20 cm) square pan with ½ the turkey mixture and cover with ½ the mashed sweet potatoes, using a knife or spatula to create a smooth, icing-like layer. Brush the top with 1 tbsp melted butter. Use remaining ingredients to make a second casserole. Preheat oven to 350°F (180°C) and bake for 30 minutes. (For frozen casserole, bake at 350°F/180°C for 1 hour and 15 minutes.)

Each casserole is 6 servings.

Our recipe tester, Jenny Koniuk, tests Nutrition using both imperial and metric measurements. However, proportions in the metric version may differ slightly from the original, causing small variations in the result.

calories, 22 g total fat, 7 g saturated fat, 3.5 g trans fat and 890 mg sodium. That's a product targeted to kids!

If it's deep-fried or battered, take heed. Wings, veal parmesan or chicken Kiev may tempt your little diner, but a 140 g serving of PC Chicken Kiev contains 388 calories, 28 g fat and 598 mg sodium.

Rather than dodge nutritional bullets in the frozen food section, rely on your own great cooking. That's what Melanie Mahon and her husband, Stacey Colwell, of Bridgewater, NS, have done — despite the demands of

raising two young children. Mahon says planning is key. When she takes the time to plot out a week's menus and shop with a detailed list, it's painless to stay on track.

"Not only do we save money and waste less food," she says, "but it really makes life easier." ♥

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