Too much salt

Adults in Switzerland consume on average 12 g of table salt or sodium chloride per day, an excessive amount that contributes to high blood pressure (6 to 8 g per day is plenty). Of this, 80 per cent is “hidden” in industrially processed foods such as bread, cheese, pastries and ready-made meals. Potato chips, peanuts and a plethora of other snacks contain large amounts of salt (some manufacturers list the sodium rather than the salt content).

Canned or frozen food

Canning is a good way to preserve seasonal fruits and vegetables. From a health standpoint, canned goods contain as many vitamins and nutrients as fresh produce that has been picked weeks before it is eaten. From an environmental point of view, canning consumes less energy than freezing -- and aluminium can be recycled.

Bulk buying

Food purchased in bulk is less costly than food purchased in small quantities and requires proportionally less packaging.

Palm oil

Many foods contain palm oil produced by monoculture, a farming method that relies heavily on fertilizers and insecticides. Often located in south-east Asia, oil-palm plantations are contributing to the destruction of virgin rainforests. However, some palm-oil manufacturers use sustainable methods that are socially responsible and respectful of the environment. Find out which ones on www.checkyouroil.ch.

Frozen vs refrigerated food

Refrigerated food is more energy efficient than frozen food in terms of preparation, preservation and cooking.

Heaps of trash

According to a study conducted in a French supermarket, one shopping cart of groceries yields on average two shopping carts of trash.

Additives

Industrial processing robs many foods of their taste and nutritional value while altering their aspect. As a result, numerous additives must be introduced to improve their presentation and taste and to help preserve them. These additives often trigger food intolerances. This is true, for example, of sodium glutamate (E 621), which is an inexpensive taste enhancer.

Reading labels

Manufacturers of ready-made meals are required to provide a list of ingredients, with the exact proportions, on the label (e.g. the proportion of mushrooms in a mushroom risotto). The label also frequently provides information on the energy, protein, sugar and fat content of the meal. This gives consumers an idea of the nutritional value of the food on offer and makes it easier for them to compare products and make wiser choices.

Putting health and the environment on the menu

Over the years, eating habits have changed. Ready-made meals (refrigerated, freeze-dried or frozen) and snack foods have become increasingly popular. However, this way of eating produces heaps of trash, consumes excessive energy (especially frozen foods) and could present health risks (hidden salt, sugar, fat and additives).
Eating on the run
New eating habits are gradually taking over. In the past, families generally ate three home-cooked meals a day while sitting together at the dining table. Today, people tend to consume ready-made meals, often alone, on the run and at irregular hours. Many prefer to snack at their desks rather than to sit down and enjoy a meal in the company of others.

Quick meals can be healthy
To keep pace with these new habits, the manufacturers of ready-made meals have expanded their range of products. As a result, health-conscious consumers on tight schedules can eat balanced meals if they take the trouble to make smart choices. For instance, supermarkets now offer a selection of prepared salads made from fresh vegetables that provide the roughage and vitamins that nutritionists recommend.

Not necessarily bad for the environment
Preparing food from scratch is more time consuming but often less costly than purchasing ready-made meals. Yet for a single person, eating industrially prepared food is not necessarily less ecological. This is because factories prepare large quantities at a time and therefore can make more efficient use of resources (basic ingredients, water and energy). However, ready-made meals are only environmentally friendly if they are not frozen or over-packaged.

Poor nutrition and obesity
The main problem with ready-made meals is that consumers have no control over nutritional value or portion sizes. Such meals often contain too much sugar, salt and fat. Combined with a sedentary lifestyle, they contribute to the growing problem of obesity among the population.

“Bad” fat
Doctors recommend eating as little hydrogenated vegetable fat as possible. This kind of fat is made from highly processed, poor-quality oils (such as coprah or palm oil). Hydrogenation has the advantage of keeping industrially processed food (such as chocolate, biscuits, pastry, pizza or packaged soup) from going rancid at room temperature for long periods. However, it also produces “trans” fatty acids that have no nutritional value and can contribute to health problems such as cardiovascular disease.

“Hidden” salt and sugar
Various forms of sugar (glucose, saccharose, lactose, maltose) are added to desserts and other foods, especially sauces, to make them more pleasing to the palate. Salt is also added to a wide variety of products, often in excessive amounts, for the same reason. These are often referred to as “hidden” salt and sugar.

Food additives
Ready-made meals often contain a long list of food additives or “E” substances (colouring agents, preservatives, antioxidants, stabilizers, taste enhancers) and artificial flavouring. Although these additives are authorized and often necessary to ensure that foods look appetizing and can be stored for long periods, some of them are suspected of triggering food intolerances or allergies.

To find out more
www.maisonsante.ch
Click on Alimentation.
www.slowfood.ch
Fighting the fast-food trend.
www.adige.ch
Nutritionists in Geneva.
www.goutmieux.ch
See Appendix A.
www.fourchetteverte.ch
See Appendix A.
www.opage.ch (also in English)
Click on Viticulture for a list of ambassadeurs du terroir restaurants that serve locally produced food and wines.

Recommended reading

Eating out
Eating out is fun and saves time. However, restaurant goers don’t always know where the ingredients used in their meals came from or how they were obtained. This is why certain establishments, which can guarantee that their suppliers adhere to methods which respect animals and the environment, display special labels. A label called “Goût mieux” is issued by the Swiss branch of the WWF to restaurants that use organic ingredients and fair-trade products. The “Fourchette verte” label is awarded to restaurants that serve balanced meals, offer non-smoking areas and recycle their waste. As for the “Ambassadeur du terroir” label, it is for restaurants that use fresh ingredients from local markets and locally produced wines.