Summary of a Guide to Meat Processing

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In 2024, nearly all American households, 98 percent, purchased meat to nourish their families.

Robust scientific evidence demonstrates that meat is a rich source of high-quality protein, essential vitamins, and highly bioavailable minerals that support human health throughout the lifespan. Most important, parents know that meat, minimally processed or further processed, provides critical nutrients for their children that are not easily replaced by other foods. These meat and poultry products are affordable, available and children will eat them.

Despite this strong scientific support, public discourse around meat consumption is often clouded by confusion over processing definitions, labeling practices, and ingredient functions.

This is a summary of an in-depth white paper produced by the Meat Institute and Meat Foundation called, "A Guide to Meat Processing," dated July, 2025.

Meat is processed to:

- Kill microorganisms that make people sick
- Extend shelf life preventing food waste
- Provide consumers with different flavor options

Types of Meat Processing:

The Guide explains that all meat is processed and falls into two categories:

- **Minimally Processed Meats (MPM):** Raw, uncooked meat products that have not been significantly transformed compositionally and contain no added ingredients. Products may be reduced in size by fabrication, mincing, grinding, and/or a meat recovery system. Products include: steaks, chops, roasts, grinds and more.
- **Further Processed Meats (FPM):** Products that undergo an alteration, beyond minimal processing. Products may contain approved ingredients and/or be subjected to preservation through salting, curing, drying, or fermentation; thermal processing; batter/breading; or other processes to enhance sensory, quality, and safety attributes. Products may include ready-to-cook or not ready-to-eat and ready-to-eat products. Examples include: deli meats, hot dogs, sausages, hams, bacon, jerky and more.

The Guide also contains easy-to-read tables explaining ingredients uses and processing methods:

- **Table 1.** Processes applied to meat to create minimally or further processed meat items.
- **Table 2.** Common further processed meat products.
- **Table 3.** Ingredients Commonly Used in Further Processing.

Labeling of Processed Meats

Any meat product with two or more ingredients must comply with the US Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Services' (FSIS) strict ingredient labeling regulations.

All ingredients must be included on the product label in descending order of predominance. A list of ingredients commonly used to further process meat is found in Table 3 of "A Guide to Meat Processing," dated July, 2025.

Nutrition, Affordability, Accessibility and Convenience of Minimally and Further Processed Meats

Processed meats provide busy households with convenient, ready-to-eat or quick-cook high-quality protein sources. This convenience is crucial for working parents who must balance nutrition, time constraints, and children's selective eating habits. Consistent flavor, softer texture, and familiar formats—such as turkey deli slices, ham, meatballs, or beef sticks—can encourage adequate protein intake during key growth phases. These products also supply essential nutrients like iron, zinc, and vitamin B12 with minimal preparation, ensuring that young children receive safe, nutrient-rich meals even on the busiest weekdays. These products are some of the most affordable and popular products at retail.

Addressing Perceived Public Health Concerns

Processing meat is one of the oldest forms of food preservation, dating back to as early as 3,000 B.C. The use of ingredients and different processes to preserve meat is thoroughly studied both for its effectiveness and, more importantly, for its impact on public health. These ingredients and processes are utilized to mitigate public health hazards. Regardless, some concerns associated with MPM and FPM consumption remain at the center of scientific evaluation, including cancer, heart health and obesity.

For more detail and citations, see the in-depth white paper published by the Meat Institute and Meat Foundation called, "A Guide to Meat Processing," dated July, 2025.