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Ready Meal. Pros and Cons

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Abstract: Ready-to-eat foods are becoming increasingly popular as urban lifestyles, higher incomes, and busy schedules make quick meals more attractive. Research shows that although people appreciate these products for their convenience, affordability, and pleasant taste, they are generally less healthy than meals prepared at home. Many ready-made dishes contain high levels of salt, saturated fat, and calories, while offering less fiber and fewer vegetables. Even so, consumers continue to choose them for their practicality. At the same time, interest in plant-based ready meals is rising, driven by growing awareness of health and environmental benefits.

Introduction: Ready-made meals are fully, or partially prepared foods sold in supermarkets, designed to be heated or served directly with minimal effort. Defined as cooked meals requiring only reheating, they are also known as convenience meals because they simplify the cooking process. In today's fast-paced society, where people have limited time for home cooking, these products offer a practical and efficient solution. They meet the growing demand for quick, accessible food options, providing an easy alternative to traditional meal preparation without reducing immediacy or convenience.

Material and method

This study is based on recent scientific literature, industry reports, and publicly available data on the ready-meal market. A comparative analysis was used to examine differences between ready-made and traditional meals, supported by simple thematic tables that summarize classifications, nutritional aspects, and key consumption trends. All collected information was synthesized to outline the main advantages, limitations, and current evolution of ready-meal products.

Table 2. The Evolution and classification of ready meal products

Criterion	Description
The Evolution of ready meal products	The ready-meal market has experienced significant growth in recent years, driven both by the increased strategic focus placed on this segment by retail chains and by continuous innovation and investment from manufacturers. Whether referring to soups, meat-based specialties, complete meal kits, sandwiches, salads, or ethnic dishes, these products are increasingly well represented across major retail networks, which contribute to enhanced visibility and prominence of the category.
The history of ready meal products	Products classified under the ready meal category emerged on the market as early as the late 1960s, reaching peak popularity during the 1970s. Over the past decade, the ready-to-eat food industry has experienced a substantial surge. Contemporary consumers tend to favor fresh meals with fewer ingredients and healthier options that align more closely with their lifestyle choices.
Types of ready meal products	Ready-to-eat meals encompass a wide range of products, including cooked dishes, breaded items, and stews. These meals are typically packaged in individual containers or small portions, making them easy to transport and consume at the workplace or while on the move. They require minimal preparation, usually involving only heating in a conventional oven or microwave, which enhances their practicality and appeal in fast-paced environments.

Table 4. Advantages of ready meal consumption

Advantages	Supporting Points
It is time-efficient	For individuals with demanding schedules who lack the time or inclination to cook, or who have limited alternatives during working hours, this type of nutrition can serve as a practical and efficient means of accessing a cooked meal without significantly disrupting their routine.
It can serve as a healthy eating alternative	Those with monotonous eating habits, who frequently skip meals or tend to consume unhealthy foods such as pastries, pretzels, or sweets, may substantially improve their diet using ordered meals.
It may provide dietary variety	It is advisable to consume a diverse range of foods and to vary one's menu as much as possible to benefit from a broader spectrum of nutrients.
It offers a practical solution for hosting festive meals at home	For individuals who regularly host celebrations or festive meals at home, takeaway food can offer a rapid and effective solution, both by eliminating the need to prepare large quantities and by enabling greater variety.
It can facilitate the discovery of new preferred foods	Consumers who enjoy exploring new culinary options and incorporating diverse foods into their diet may discover new preferences that can be integrated more frequently into their meal planning.

Results and discussions

Table 1. Differences and similarities between ready-made meals and traditional meals

Criterion	Ready meals	Traditional meals	Remarks
Preparation Time	5–15 minutes (heating)	30–90 minutes	Ready meals significantly reduce preparation time
Convenience	High	Requires cooking	Supports adaptation to a busy lifestyle
Cost	Higher per portion	Lower if ingredients are purchased separately	Cost difference may influence consumption frequency
Nutritional Content	Often lower in fiber, vitamins, may contain preservatives	Can be tailored for balanced nutrition	Traditional meals allow better control over ingredients and nutritional value
Health Perception	Sometimes viewed as less healthy due to additives and processing	Generally perceived as healthier and more natural	Consumer perception influences trust and long-term dietary choices

Table 3. Classification of ready-to-eat products available on the market based on thermal processing.

Refrigerate	Frozen	Fresh
Salads, sandwiches	Cooked meals	Cooked meals
Cooked meals	Pizza, pasta	Desserts
Pizza, pasta	Desserts	Meat products
Desserts	Meat products	Soups and stews
Meat products	Fruits and vegetables	Fruits and vegetables
Fruits and vegetables	Soups and stews	"Breakfast cup" yogurts with muesli, seeds, and fresh fruits

Conclusions

Ready meals offer convenience and affordability that suit modern lifestyles, but their nutritional drawbacks remain a concern. The growing shift toward healthier, plant-based options signals a demand for more balanced and sustainable alternatives in the ready-meal market.

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