Do I REALLY need to “Eat Clean” to be Healthy?

Ask 10 different dietitians, personal trainers, fitness fanatics, or health professionals what it means to “eat clean” and you’ll get 10 different answers. Because there is no formal definition of the concept of "clean eating", its range of interpretations is wide and broad.

Generally, the concept of “eating clean” is a good one: eat plenty of whole, nutritious foods and less of the processed stuff. But some extra-enthusiastic “clean eaters” tend to discount the benefits of some food processing. Other over-zealous “clean eaters” frown upon any food that happens to come in a package. These practices can lead to ultra-restrictive dietary intake and ultimately, a less-than-healthy diet.

Some food processing can be good for you – for example, milk, soy milk, and some juices (among other products) are frequently fortified with calcium and vitamin D, to promote bone health. Frozen fruit and vegetables are other examples; it’s the flash freezing process (get that? “process”) that actually locks in the potency of many of the vitamins and anti-oxidants, making frozen produce just as, or slightly more, nutritious than fresh produce (particularly fresh produce that was picked a while back, then sat in the store for a time, then sat on your kitchen counter for a bit more time – all the while, losing nutritional value). Some other nutrient-dense healthful foods that happen to come in a package and are subject to various amounts of processing are hummus, Greek yogurt, natural (one/two ingredient) peanut butter, whole grain/low sugar breakfast cereals, among many others.

The convenience of packaged foods cannot be overlooked – products like no-sugar-added tomato sauce, bagged salads and pre-cut/washed vegetables, canned reduced sodium broth and soup allow us to toss tasty nutritious meals in must minutes, rather than zipping through the far less “clean” fast food drive-through line. Products like canned fruit, when packed in its own juice or light syrup, becomes a good alternative when fresh fruit isn’t available.

And foods touted as “clean” or “less processed” aren’t necessarily healthy for you – agave nectar and honey come to mind here. Both of these are forms of added sugar – and should be minimized in one’s diet, just as white sugar (sucrose) or high fructose corns syrup should. Because added sugars are a problem in our general food supply, look for (and avoid) products that have sugar (of any form) as one of the first few ingredients. Other terms for sugar include (and none are “healthier” than others): sugar, maltose, brown sugar, corn syrup, cane sugar, honey and fruit juice concentrate.

Canned vegetables and soups aren’t typically on the menu for someone attempting to eat “clean”, but that doesn’t mean they can’t be a part of a healthy diet. They are an inexpensive, convenient, and often time-saving way to get vitamins, minerals, fiber and other important nutrients. One of the nutritional drawbacks of processed foods, and canned foods, specifically, is the sodium content. Always look for “reduced sodium”, or “no added salt” labels when choosing canned vegetables and beans. If you can’t find a lower-sodium option, simply rinse them, and reduce the sodium content by about 40%.
Bottom line: “Clean Eating” is a good concept; but there’s no true, official definition of what makes a food or meal “clean”. What one may consider “clean”, another may consider unacceptable. Remember that a healthy diet is one that includes a variety of food from every food group. Generally speaking, fresh, whole foods that are minimally processed are best, but there is nothing inherently unhealthy about some processing or packaging. When someone obsesses over “clean” foods, they tend to imply that foods that don't meet his or her individual definition of “clean” are actually “dirty”, which simply isn’t true.

http://www.eatright.org/resource/food/nutrition/nutrition-facts-and-food-labels/avoiding-processed-foods
http://www.goodhousekeeping.com/health/diet-nutrition/a37595/what-is-clean-eating/