

Thermal Processing in Food Preservation: A Comprehensive Review of Pasteurization, Sterilization, and Blanching

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Abstract:

Thermal processing stands as a cornerstone in food preservation, employing heat to inactivate microorganisms and enzymes, thereby enhancing food safety and extending shelf life. This review comprehensively examines the principles and applications of pasteurization, sterilization, and blanching, the three primary heat treatment techniques. Pasteurization, a mild process, targets pathogenic bacteria while preserving nutritional and sensory attributes, utilizing methods like LTLT, HTST, and UHT. Sterilization, an intensive approach, eliminates all microorganisms, including spores, crucial for shelf-stable products such as canned goods and aseptic beverages. Blanching, a pre-processing step, inactivates enzymes in fruits and vegetables, maintaining quality before freezing or canning. The efficacy of these methods hinges on factors such as temperature, time, microbial resistance, food composition, and packaging. This review also explores the advantages and disadvantages of heat treatment, including extended shelf life and food safety versus nutrient loss and energy consumption. Technological advancements, such as microwave blanching and ohmic heating, are revolutionizing thermal processing, aiming for improved energy efficiency and nutrient retention. Balancing microbial control with product quality remains a pivotal challenge, driving ongoing innovation in heat treatment technologies.

Key words: thermal processing; pasteurization; sterilization; blanching; food preservation; microbial inactivation; food safety

Introduction

Principles of Heat Treatment

Heat treatment is a crucial process in food preservation, primarily aimed at microbial and enzyme inactivation to enhance food safety and longevity. High temperatures effectively destroy microorganisms by denaturing their proteins and disrupting cell membranes, preventing bacterial growth and spoilage. Additionally, heat deactivates enzymes responsible for undesirable changes in food, such as browning, texture degradation, and off-flavours, thereby maintaining product quality. By controlling microbial and enzymatic activity, heat treatment significantly extends the shelf life of food products, ensuring they remain safe and consumable for longer periods. This process is widely applied in food processing techniques such as pasteurization, sterilization, and blanching to enhance both the safety and stability of perishable foods. Heat treatment is one of the most fundamental methods of food preservation, ensuring food safety, extending shelf life, and maintaining food quality [1-3]. The efficiency of thermal processing depends on several factors, including temperature, duration, and the composition of the food being treated. Among the several types of heat treatment used in food preservation, three primary techniques stand out: pasteurization, sterilization, and blanching. Each of these methods serves a distinct

purpose and is applied to different food products to achieve microbial safety, enzymatic stability, and extended usability. Understanding these processes is crucial for food manufacturers and consumers alike, as they balance microbial control with the retention of nutrients and sensory properties. Pasteurization is a relatively mild heat treatment that primarily targets pathogenic microorganisms to make food safe for consumption and extend its shelf life. This method involves heating food below 100°C, which eliminates non-spore-forming bacteria while preserving most of the food's original taste, texture, and nutritional composition. Common applications of pasteurization include dairy products, fruit juices, eggs, and alcoholic beverages, all of which benefit from microbial reduction without significant alteration of flavour and nutrients. Various pasteurization techniques, such as Low-Temperature, Long-Time (LTLT), High-Temperature, Short-Time (HTST), and Ultra-High Temperature (UHT), are employed depending on the food product and desired shelf life. LTLT pasteurization, for instance, is widely used in dairy products, involving heating milk to 63°C for 30 minutes, whereas HTST pasteurization requires rapid heating to 72°C for just 15 seconds to kill bacteria while maintaining the milk's freshness. UHT pasteurization, applied at 135-150°C for 3-5 seconds, is commonly used for long-life

milk and juices, ensuring complete microbial elimination while allowing storage without refrigeration. While pasteurization is effective in making food microbiologically safe, it has certain drawbacks, such as the inability to destroy spores and the potential loss of heat-sensitive vitamins, particularly Vitamin C and B1.[3-5] For food products requiring long-term stability without refrigeration, sterilization is a more intensive heat treatment process that involves temperatures exceeding 100°C. Unlike pasteurization, sterilization eliminates all microorganisms, including bacterial spores, making it an essential process for shelf-stable products. The most common applications of sterilization include canned foods, retort pouches, and medical nutrition products, where absolute sterility is required to prevent spoilage. There are different sterilization methods, including retort processing (canning), aseptic processing, and dry heat sterilization. Retort sterilization, widely used in canned soups, meats, and vegetables, involves heating food at 121°C for 15-30 minutes to kill all harmful bacteria and spores. Aseptic processing, which is commonly applied to liquid dairy and beverages, uses ultra-high temperatures (135-150°C) for 4-6 seconds before filling products into sterile containers, ensuring long shelf life without refrigeration. Dry heat sterilization, used for food packaging materials, requires temperatures of 160-170°C for 1-2 hours, effectively eliminating bacteria and spores. While sterilization is extremely effective in extending shelf life up to 2-5 years, it also has drawbacks, including the loss of certain nutrients, alterations in texture and colour, and higher energy consumption compared to pasteurization. A milder form of heat treatment, blanching, is commonly used as a pre-processing step for vegetables, fruits, and nuts before freezing, drying, or canning. Blanching involves briefly immersing food in boiling water or exposing it to steam to inactivate enzymes responsible for spoilage, while also preserving colour, texture, and flavour. Unlike the complete microbial eradication achieved through pasteurization and sterilization, blanching provides a partial reduction in microbial load [6-15].

Type of Pasteurization	Temperature (°C)	Time Duration	Common Applications
LTLT (Low Temp, Long Time)	63°C	30 minutes	Milk, dairy products
HTST (High Temp, Short Time)	72°C	15 seconds	Juices, liquid eggs
UHT (Ultra-High Temperature)	135°C	2-5 seconds	Shelf-stable milk, cream

Table :1. Types of Heat Treatment [6-8].

2. Sterilization

Sterilization is a more intense heat treatment process that eliminates all microorganisms, including bacterial spores, by heating food to temperatures above 100°C. Unlike pasteurization, which targets only pathogenic and spoilage organisms, sterilization ensures complete microbial inactivation, making foods shelf-stable for long periods without refrigeration [10].

Type of Sterilization	Temperature (°C)	Time Duration	Common Applications
Conventional Sterilization	110-130°C	10-60 minutes	Canned vegetables, meats
Retort Sterilization	115-121°C	15-40 minutes	Retort pouch meals
Aseptic Processing	135-150°C	2-6 seconds	Shelf-stable beverages

Table:2. Sterilization [9-12]

3. Blanching

Blanching is a brief heat treatment process that involves immersing food, typically vegetables, in boiling water or steam for a short duration. The primary objective of blanching is to inactivate spoilage enzymes, preserve colour and texture, and reduce microbial load before further processing

Type of Blanching	Temperature (°C)	Time Duration	Common Applications
Water Blanching	80-100°C	1-5 minutes	Leafy greens, carrots
Steam Blanching	85-100°C	2-5 minutes	Peas, beans, broccoli
Microwave Blanching	100°C	1-3 minutes	Small vegetables

Table 3: Blanching

Types of Heat Treatment and Factors Affecting Heat Treatment in Food Processing

Heat treatment is a fundamental process in food preservation, designed to inactivate microorganisms and enzymes while maintaining the quality of food products. The choice of heat treatment method depends on the nature of the food, the desired shelf life, and the required level of microbial control. The three primary types of heat treatment—pasteurization, sterilization, and blanching serve different purposes based on their intensity and application. Several factors influence the effectiveness of heat treatment, including temperature, duration, microbial resistance, food composition, and packaging materials. This section explores these aspects in detail [13-18].

Types of Heat Treatment

1. Pasteurization

Pasteurization is a mild heat treatment process used to destroy pathogenic microorganisms and extend the shelf life of food products without significantly altering their nutritional and sensory qualities. The process typically involves heating foods to a temperature below 100°C for a specific duration, depending on the type of food and the microorganisms targeted.

Pasteurization is widely applied in liquid foods such as milk, fruit juices, and certain alcoholic beverages. There are two primary methods of pasteurization: **Low-Temperature Long-Time (LTLT) pasteurization**, which involves heating the product to around 63°C for 30 minutes, and **High-Temperature Short-Time (HTST) pasteurization**, where the temperature is raised to approximately 72°C for 15 seconds. Ultra-high temperature (UHT) pasteurization, a more intense form, heats food to about 135°C for a few seconds, making it shelf-stable for extended periods [16-22].

Sterilization is commonly used for canned foods, retort pouch products, and other ready-to-eat meals that require long-term storage. The process involves exposing foods to temperatures typically ranging from 110°C to 130°C for varying durations, depending on the food's composition and packaging. Retort sterilization, a widely used method, involves placing packaged foods in pressurized steam chambers to achieve complete microbial destruction[11,12].

such as freezing or canning. Blanching is particularly useful for preventing enzymatic browning and texture degradation in fruits and vegetables. The time and temperature for blanching depend on the food type, with most processes occurring between 80°C and 100°C for 1 to 5 minutes [13-15].

Factors Affecting Heat Treatment

Several factors influence the effectiveness of heat treatment in food processing. Understanding these variables helps optimize processing parameters to ensure microbial safety while preserving the quality of food products.

1. Temperature and Time

Heat Treatment	Temperature (°C)	Time Duration	Effectiveness
Pasteurization	63-135°C	Seconds to minutes	Partial microbial inactivation
Sterilization	110-150°C	Minutes to hours	Complete microbial inactivation
Blanching	80-100°C	Seconds to minutes	Enzyme inactivation

Table 4: Temperature and Time[16]

2. Heat Resistance of Microorganisms

Different microorganisms exhibit varying levels of heat resistance, requiring adjustments in processing conditions. Thermophilic bacteria

and spores, for example, require higher temperatures and longer processing times for complete inactivation.

Microorganism Type	Heat Resistance	Common Heat Treatment Used
Pathogenic Bacteria	Low to Moderate	Pasteurization
Spores (e.g., Clostridium botulinum)	High	Sterilization
Enzymes (e.g., polyphenol oxidase)	Moderate	Blanching

Table 5: Heat Resistance of Microorganisms [17,18]

3. Food Composition

The composition of food significantly influences heat penetration and microbial survival. Factors such as pH, moisture content, and fat levels affect how heat interacts with food components.

Food Factor	Effect on Heat Treatment	Example
High Moisture	Faster heat penetration	Soups, broths
High Fat Content	Slower heat penetration	Cream-based sauces
Low pH (Acidic)	Enhances microbial inactivation	Citrus juices

Table 6: Effect on Heat Treatment[19,20]

4. Packaging

Packaging materials influence heat transfer efficiency during heat treatment. Different packaging options can either facilitate or hinder heat penetration.

Packaging Type	Effect on Heat Treatment	Example
Metal Cans	Excellent heat conductor	Canned vegetables
Glass Jars	Slower heat penetration	Preserved fruits
Retort Pouches	High heat resistance, fast processing	Ready-to-eat meals

Table 7: Packaging Type [16-18]

Heat treatment is a crucial process in food preservation, with different methods tailored to specific applications. Pasteurization is ideal for minimally processed products requiring extended shelf life, sterilization ensures complete microbial inactivation for long-term storage, and blanching serves as a preparatory step for other preservation methods. The effectiveness of heat treatment depends on various factors, including temperature-time relationships, microbial heat resistance, food composition, and packaging materials. By optimizing these parameters, food manufacturers can ensure safe, high-quality products while maintaining nutritional integrity [18-21].

Types and Methods of Heat Treatment in Food Processing

Heat treatment is one of the most widely used food preservation techniques, ensuring microbial inactivation, enzyme deactivation, and prolonged shelf life. Various types of heat treatment, such as pasteurization, sterilization, and blanching, are employed depending on the food product and its intended use. The methods used to apply heat treatment, including batch processing, continuous processing, and aseptic processing, further influence food quality, safety, and efficiency [19-21].

Types of Heat Treatment

1. Pasteurization

Pasteurization is a mild heat treatment technique primarily used to destroy pathogenic microorganisms and extend the shelf life of food products. This process involves heating food to temperatures below 100°C for a specific period, sufficient to kill harmful bacteria while preserving most of the product's sensory and nutritional qualities.

There are three common types of pasteurization:

- **Low-Temperature Long-Time (LTLT):** Heating food to around 63°C for 30 minutes, typically used for dairy products.
- **High-Temperature Short-Time (HTST):** Heating to about 72°C for 15 seconds, often used for milk and fruit juices.
- **Ultra-High Temperature (UHT):** Heating food to approximately 135°C for 2-5 seconds, making products like milk and cream shelf-stable for extended periods without refrigeration.

Type of Pasteurization	Temperature (°C)	Time Duration	Common Applications
LTLT (Low Temp, Long Time)	63°C	30 minutes	Milk, dairy products
HTST (High Temp, Short Time)	72°C	15 seconds	Juices, liquid eggs
UHT (Ultra-High Temperature)	135°C	2-5 seconds	Shelf-stable milk, cream

Table 9: Type of Pasteurization [19-22]

2. Sterilization

Sterilization is a more intense heat treatment method aimed at eliminating all microorganisms, including bacterial spores, to ensure long-term storage. Unlike pasteurization, which only targets pathogenic bacteria, sterilization provides complete microbial inactivation. This process is commonly used for canned foods, retort pouch products, and other shelf-stable meals.

Sterilization is performed at temperatures exceeding 100°C, typically ranging from 110°C to 130°C, for varying durations. One of the most widely used sterilization techniques is **retort sterilization**, which

involves placing sealed food containers in a pressurized steam environment to achieve commercial sterility.

3. Blanching

Blanching is a brief heat treatment used primarily for vegetables and fruits before further processing, such as freezing or canning. The purpose of blanching is to inactivate spoilage enzymes, reduce microbial load, and preserve the colour, texture, and nutritional value of the product. Blanching is performed by immersing food in boiling water or exposing it to steam for short durations, typically between 80°C and 100°C for 1-5 minutes.

Type of Heat Treatment	Temperature (°C)	Time Duration	Common Applications
Pasteurization	63-135°C	Seconds to minutes	Milk, juices, eggs
Sterilization	110-130°C	Minutes to hours	Canned foods, ready meals
Blanching	80-100°C	Seconds to minutes	Vegetables, fruits

Table :10. Type of Heat Treatment

Methods of Heat Treatment

The method of applying heat treatment to food influences the efficiency, safety, and quality of the final product. The three primary methods used in food processing industries are batch processing, continuous processing, and aseptic processing.

1. Batch Processing

Batch processing involves treating a fixed quantity of food at a time. This method is commonly used for heat treatments such as pasteurization, sterilization, and blanching. The food product is placed in a processing unit, heated for a specific duration, and then cooled before being packaged or further processed.

Batch processing is widely used in small-scale food production and traditional canning methods. The advantage of batch processing is its flexibility, allowing processors to control individual batches and adjust parameters for different food types. However, it is labour-intensive and less efficient compared to continuous processing.

Example: Retort sterilization is a classic example of batch processing. Food is sealed in metal cans or glass jars and placed in a pressurized steam chamber, where it is heated to a specific temperature for a set time to achieve commercial sterility.

2. Continuous Processing

Continuous processing involves treating a continuous flow of food instead of processing it in batches. This method is commonly used in large-scale food manufacturing, where efficiency, consistency, and cost-effectiveness are critical. Continuous heat treatment systems, such as tunnel pasteurizers and high-speed UHT processors, enable high-throughput production.

The primary benefit of continuous processing is that it reduces processing time and energy consumption while ensuring uniform heating. However,

it requires significant initial investment in specialized equipment and automation systems.

Example: High-Temperature Short-Time (HTST) pasteurization in the dairy industry is an example of continuous processing. Milk is passed through a heat exchanger, heated to 72°C for 15 seconds, and rapidly cooled before packaging.

3. Aseptic Processing

Aseptic processing is an advanced heat treatment method that sterilizes food and packaging separately before filling the product in a sterile environment. This technique is used for shelf-stable liquid foods, such as UHT milk, fruit juices, and soups, ensuring an extended shelf life without refrigeration.

Aseptic processing combines UHT sterilization with sterile packaging materials. The process involves three key steps:

1. **Food sterilization:** The food product is heated to a high temperature (135°C-150°C) for a few seconds.
2. **Packaging sterilization:** The packaging materials are treated with steam, heat, or chemical sterilant.
3. **Filling and sealing:** The sterilized food is filled into the sterile packaging in an aseptic chamber and sealed immediately.

The primary advantage of aseptic processing is that it maintains food quality, flavour, and nutritional value while eliminating the need for preservatives. However, it requires advanced equipment and stringent quality control measures.

Example: UHT milk processing is a well-known application of aseptic processing, where milk is rapidly heated to 135°C for a few seconds and then packed in sterile, multi-layered cartons.

Comparison of Heat Treatment Methods

Method	Process Type	Application	Advantages	Limitations
Batch Processing	Discontinuous	Canned foods, small-scale pasteurization	Flexible, suitable for diverse products	Labor-intensive, slow process
Continuous Processing	Continuous	HTST pasteurization, sterilization	High efficiency, uniform heating	Requires high initial investment
Aseptic Processing	Continuous	UHT milk, juice, liquid foods	Extended shelf life, maintains quality	Expensive, requires sterile conditions

Table :11. Comparison of Heat Treatment Methods [19]

Heat treatment is a critical component of food processing, ensuring food safety, extending shelf life, and preserving quality. The choice of heat treatment—pasteurization, sterilization, or blanching—depends on the type of food and its intended storage duration. Furthermore, the method of applying heat treatment, whether through batch, continuous, or aseptic processing, impacts efficiency and product consistency. Batch processing is suitable for small-scale operations, continuous processing enhances production efficiency, and aseptic processing offers superior shelf stability without refrigeration. By selecting the appropriate heat treatment and processing method, food manufacturers can optimize product safety and quality while meeting consumer demands.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Heat Treatment in Food Processing

Heat treatment is a widely used food preservation technique that plays a crucial role in extending the shelf life of food products, ensuring safety, and enhancing convenience. However, despite its benefits, heat treatment also has drawbacks, including nutrient loss, sensory changes, and high energy consumption. This section explores the advantages and disadvantages of heat treatment in food processing, along with comparative tables illustrating key aspects.

V. Advantages of Heat Treatment

Heat treatment provides multiple advantages in food preservation, making it an essential process in the food industry. Some of the key benefits include:

1. Extended Shelf Life

One of the primary advantages of heat treatment is its ability to extend the shelf life of food products by inactivating spoilage microorganisms and enzymes. This is particularly useful for perishable foods such as dairy, meats, fruits, and vegetables. Heat-treated foods, such as pasteurized milk and canned vegetables, can last for weeks or even months without refrigeration, reducing food waste and ensuring food availability. For example, pasteurization extends the shelf life of milk from a few days to several weeks, while sterilization can keep canned goods safe for consumption for years. This makes heat treatment an indispensable process for both households and the food industry [25].

2. Food Safety

Another critical benefit of heat treatment is its role in eliminating harmful microorganisms that cause foodborne illnesses. Bacteria such as *Salmonella*, *Listeria monocytogenes*, and *Escherichia coli* (E. coli) are responsible for serious food-related infections. Heat treatment processes, such as pasteurization and sterilization, help in effectively destroying these pathogens, ensuring that food remains safe for consumption. Heat treatment is especially important in dairy processing, meat preservation, and the preparation of baby foods, where food safety is a primary concern. By killing pathogens, heat treatment significantly reduces the risk of foodborne diseases, making it an essential public health measure [26].

3. Convenience

Heat treatment also enhances the convenience of food products. Many heat-treated foods are ready-to-eat or require minimal preparation, making them highly suitable for modern lifestyles. Products such as UHT milk, canned soups, and pre-cooked meals save consumers time and effort, allowing for quick and easy meal preparation. Moreover, heat-treated foods are widely used in the foodservice industry, where ready-to-use ingredients and long shelf life are crucial for efficient operations. This makes heat treatment an essential component of processed food manufacturing [27-29].

VI. Disadvantages of Heat Treatment [26-29]

While heat treatment offers several advantages, it also has certain limitations. These include nutrient loss, changes in flavour and texture, and high energy consumption.

1. Nutrient Loss

One of the major disadvantages of heat treatment is the potential loss of heat-sensitive vitamins and nutrients. Some essential vitamins, such as vitamin C, thiamine (B1), and folate, are highly sensitive to heat and degrade during processing. This can reduce the nutritional quality of certain foods, especially fresh fruits and vegetables.

For example, prolonged boiling or blanching can lead to significant vitamin C loss in vegetables like spinach and broccoli. Similarly, pasteurization can reduce the content of certain B vitamins in dairy products. While some losses can be minimized by using milder heat treatments such as low-temperature pasteurization, nutrient degradation remains a challenge in food processing.

2. Flavour and Texture Changes

Heat treatment can alter the sensory properties of food, including flavour, texture, and color. In some cases, prolonged exposure to high temperatures can lead to undesirable changes, such as overcooking, loss of natural crispness, or caramelization of sugars.

For instance, pasteurized juices may taste slightly different from freshly squeezed juices due to thermal degradation of aromatic compounds. Similarly, sterilized or canned vegetables may become softer and lose their original texture compared to their fresh counterparts. These changes can affect consumer preferences, making it important for food manufacturers to balance heat treatment parameters [30].

3. Energy Consumption

Heat treatment processes require significant energy inputs, making them energy intensive. Methods such as sterilization and retort processing involve high temperatures and extended heating times, leading to high fuel or electricity consumption. This not only increases production costs but also contributes to the environmental impact of food processing industries.

For example, UHT processing and industrial-scale pasteurization consume large amounts of energy to maintain precise heating and cooling cycles. Sustainable solutions, such as optimizing heat recovery systems and using renewable energy sources, are being explored to reduce the energy footprint of heat treatment processes [30].

Disadvantage	Description
Nutrient Loss	Heat-sensitive vitamins and nutrients degrade.
Flavour & Texture Changes	Heat alters the sensory properties of food.
Energy Consumption	Heat treatment requires significant energy input.

Table: 12. Disadvantages of Heat Treatment [26-30]

Balancing the Advantages and Disadvantages

The benefits of heat treatment often outweigh its drawbacks, especially when it comes to food safety and shelf-life extension. However, food scientists and manufacturers continually work on improving heat treatment techniques to minimize its disadvantages. Some strategies include:

- **Optimizing Processing Parameters:** Adjusting time and temperature settings to preserve nutrients while ensuring microbial safety.
- **Alternative Preservation Methods:** Using techniques like high-pressure processing (HPP) or cold pasteurization to reduce thermal damage.
- **Energy Efficiency Measures:** Implementing heat recovery systems and renewable energy sources to lower energy consumption [19,30].

By striking a balance between effectiveness and sustainability, heat treatment remains a cornerstone of food preservation while evolving to meet modern demands for nutritional quality and environmental responsibility.

Conclusion

Heat treatment is a fundamental process in food preservation, offering multiple advantages such as extended shelf life, improved food safety, and convenience. By inactivating harmful microorganisms and enzymes, heat treatment ensures that food remains safe and stable for consumption over extended periods. However, despite these benefits, heat treatment has certain limitations, including nutrient loss, sensory changes, and high energy consumption. To address these challenges, food manufacturers continuously innovate to optimize processing conditions, reduce thermal damage, and improve energy efficiency. As consumer demand for high-quality, nutritious, and minimally processed foods grows, new technologies such as high-pressure processing and infrared heating are being explored as alternatives or complements to traditional heat treatment methods. Ultimately, heat treatment remains an essential tool in the global food supply chain, enabling large-scale food production while maintaining food safety and quality. By refining heat treatment techniques and integrating sustainable practices, the food industry can continue to provide safe, nutritious, and convenient food products for consumers worldwide.

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