

# Meal Planning Made Easy

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What's for dinner? If you often find yourself in a last-minute scramble, trying to figure out what to make, you're not alone. Does the thought of planning a menu feel like a daunting task? Even if you've struggled in the past, by spending a little time up front, you can make it faster and easier to answer the question, "what's for dinner?"

## **Creating Nutritious Meals in Four Easy Steps**

If meal planning doesn't start for you until you are hungry or walk into the grocery store, you might find yourself spending more on groceries due to impulse purchases or making extra trips to the store to pick up things you forgot. It can also be tempting to take less-nutritious shortcuts such as using high-sodium prepared meals or stopping at the fast food drive-thru window. Investing just a little time to plan some of your meals each week is a great way to make better choices while saving time and money. Try these four easy steps:

### *Step 1: Brainstorm possible options*

Ask yourself:

- What are our favorite meals?
- What ingredients do I need to create balanced meals?

A great plan begins with a list of ideas. If you have family members, ask for their input as well. Use your cookbooks and favorite recipes to build the list of possible meal options. Once you create your list, keep it in a drawer or post it on the fridge so you always have it to refer to. Keeping this list front and center also makes it easier to shop for the ingredients so they are always on hand. If you try a new meal or recipe that your family enjoys, be sure to add it!

### *Step 2: Create a meal plan*

As you think about your plan, here are some tips:

- Break it down a week at a time. Don't feel like you have time to plan for every day? Start with just a few days at first.
- Looking at the week ahead, which days have activities that affect meal prep and eating time? Which days do you have more time?
- What meals can be prepared quickly when time is limited, or when might an option such as a slow cooker meal make the most sense?

Write down the meals you plan to make and on which days in the coming week.

### *Step 3: Make a shopping list*

Use your meal plan to help you get started and take an inventory of the kitchen. Ask yourself:

- What do I already have on hand?
- What ingredients do I need to make the meals I planned for the week?
- How much of each ingredient do I need?

When you make your list, don't forget about other staples, snacks, and items for lunches to take to work or school.

### *Step 4: Shop*

Plan your trip to the store for a time when you do not feel rushed. Stick to your list as much as possible.

### **More Tips for Planning Balanced Meals**

When creating your plan, there are several tricks and shortcuts that can make the process even easier.

- *Survey the fridge, freezer, and cabinets.* This can help you find ingredients you have on hand and need to use up. Try to work them into your plan, if possible.
- *Check the weekly store ads.* Many grocery stores send out flyers with sales and some even include meal ideas and recipes. Purchasing items when they are on sale can be a great money-saver, but be sure to purchase only those things you will use.
- *Do some advance prep work.* If a busy schedule is a barrier to eating at home, think about what you can do ahead of time. For example, if you are grilling chicken breasts for one meal, grill a couple of extras for another meal later in the week. Cut up fruits and vegetables as soon as you get home.
- *Cook in bulk.* Many meals can be made ahead, or you can double the recipe so you have leftovers to freeze. All you need to do on a busy day is thaw and reheat.
- *Look ahead to tomorrow.* Be sure to check your plan a day ahead of time to see if there are things you need to prepare or take out of the freezer for the next day's meals.
- *Recycle.* Did you create a meal plan that worked well for your family? If so, hold onto it! Once you have a few of them, you can rotate through them again.
- *Be flexible.* Having a variety of quick and simple meal options on hand may prevent a last-minute scramble when an unexpected event arises.
- *Try new ideas.* Subscribe to a healthy cooking magazine, or swap ideas with family and friends. You can also find recipes from the USDA at [www.choosemyplate.gov](http://www.choosemyplate.gov) or the Produce for Better Health Foundation at <https://fruitsandveggies.org> (click on "recipes" at the top of the page).

### **What's Your Meal Plan Style?**

There is no one-size-fits-all strategy for making your meal plan visible. If you have family members who are helping with the meal plan, a fun menu marker board or chalkboard posted in the kitchen can work nicely. Perhaps a calendar layout works better for you. Or if you're tech savvy, there are many tools and gadgets you can use to help with meal planning, from creating a

spreadsheet on your own to using a smartphone app to help set up your plan and generate a grocery list.

No matter what method you use, meal planning does take some time up front. Fortunately, a good plan can ease the pressure of answering the common “what’s for dinner?” question at the last minute. As you get started, experiment to see which methods work best for you and have fun with the process. The more you plan, the easier it will become!