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PLANNING MEALS FOR A FAMILY

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Eating Meals at Home Has Benefits

Many of today's children and adults are part of a generation that has grown up in restaurants and fast-food eateries. Preparing and eating meals at home is a better choice for many reasons.

- It is usually healthier and tastes better because the cook has control over the ingredients in meals cooked at home.
- It helps to control the amounts of food served, or the portion sizes.
- It allows for more family time. Teens and children can learn to prepare and serve meals.
- It is generally cheaper than eating out.

Meal Planning Saves Time, Money & Stress

Taking the time to plan basic simple meals for the week saves time, money, and stress. In fact, preparing a simple meal at home takes about the same amount of time as driving to a fast-food restaurant or ordering a pizza.

Learning how to plan menus may save more money on your food budget than any other skill, allowing you to buy other necessities with the money saved. Here are some benefits of having a menu plan.

- It saves trips to the grocery store.
- You only buy what you need.
- It relieves the stress of wondering what to cook for dinner at the last minute.
- No time and energy are wasted frantically searching through the pantry for a certain food.
- It provides a better variety of meal choices, and the same foods aren't served too often.

- There is no waiting while something thaws.
- Leftovers are used up before they spoil.

Steps to Meal Planning

Making a meal plan is easier than most people think. Although it takes a little time upfront, it can save time in the long run. Once you get used to it, making a weekly meal plan will seem easy. All it takes is a few easy steps.

- Make a food budget and determine how often you will shop, preferably no more than once a week.
- Note your family's schedule, which meals and snacks will be prepared at home or eaten away from home, and how many people will be eating each meal. This allows you to buy the right amount of food.
- Write a list of the foods your family likes to eat and keep it taped inside the kitchen cabinet. When you try a new recipe that everyone likes, add it to the list.
- Make enough menus for about a two-week cycle. Plan for breakfast, lunch, dinner, snacks, or five to six "mini-meals" per day. Next to each meal, write the ingredients that you need to prepare it.
- Inventory the foods you have on hand and what you need to buy. Know what foods are in the refrigerator and freezer, cupboards, cabinets, and pantry. Plan to use these foods in your menus to save money at the store.
- Keep a grocery list in the kitchen where you can see it. As you run out of staple food items during the week, add them to the list.
- Check grocery store ads for sale items that you can use in your menus.
- Write a weekly meal plan. Start with a simple plan that includes your family's main meal of the day. When you feel comfortable with that, add in one meal at a time until you work up to a weekly plan. It should include all daily meals plus snacks, even those eaten away from home.

A Simple Meal Plan: Here is an example of a simple meal plan or menu writing system to help you get started.

Sunday: Lunch at Grandmother's House

Monday: Meatless Monday

Tuesday: Dinner in a Crock-Pot

Wednesday: Soup & Sandwich

Thursday: Pasta Night

Friday: From the Grill

Saturday: Leftovers

The main dish, which is the base around which the rest of the menu is planned, should provide a serving of protein (e.g., lean meat, some beans, or a low-fat dairy product). Choose side dishes that go well with the main dish and contain plenty of raw and cooked vegetables, fruits, and whole grains (e.g., bread, pasta, rice, or cereal). Serve milk and another hot or cold beverage. A dessert, such as fresh fruit, yogurt, or pudding, is optional.

Include at least one “planned-over” meal per week to use leftover food from another meal.

Recipes: When you serve your family members’ favorite foods, you make meals more enjoyable and avoid waste. Most cooks rely on a core of about 10 favorite recipes for family meals. These should be nutritious, tasty, easy to make, and quick to prepare and cook.

Collect several low-cost, nutritious recipes for main dishes to put in your rotation, and serve them often. Include a variety of lean beef, poultry, and fish and at least one meatless dish. Find recipes for fruits and vegetables that the family likes, even the child who is a picky eater. Assemble the recipes in a recipe file or box, or put them in a loose-leaf notebook.

Other Meal Planning Tips

- Arrange your kitchen for easy use. Group equipment and utensils near the area where they are most often used.
- Invest in some appliances (e.g., microwave oven, toaster oven, pressure saucepan, and food processor) that may reduce preparation time or cook foods in less time.
- Try to time foods to finish cooking just at mealtime. Before starting a meal, think about the work to be done and the cooking time for each dish. Usually, it is best to start with the food with the longest cooking time, and then prepare the others while it cooks. However, if all the foods cook in the same amount of time, then start with the one that will hold up best.
- Save clean up time by using cookware in which the foods can be cooked, served, and stored.
- Make meal plans flexible so they can be switched around as needed, such as when you run out of an item, or food is on sale.
- Involve family members as much as possible, because fixing meals can be fun for everyone. Allow your children to help plan and prepare one meal a week. They are more likely to try new foods if they help select and prepare them.
- Post your meal plan on the refrigerator, along with a schedule of family members’ activities that may interfere with meal preparation.
- Plan meals that include a variety of foods so that your family is more likely to obtain all the nutrients needed each day.
- Serve a balance of family favorites and new recipes.
- Vary your cooking methods (e.g., grill, bake, broil, and stir fry).
- Try not to serve the same food twice in the same day.
- Consider cooking with a friend and trading meals.

MyPlate: Your Guide to Food Choices

Healthy foods provide more value for your money. Develop healthy meals and snacks for you and your family, according to MyPlate, USDA's latest food guide pyramid. It shows that foods from all groups are needed daily for good health.

MyPlate is a healthy eating plan that:

- serves as a guideline for what and how much to eat for the entire day or for several days.
- emphasizes fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and fat-free or low-fat milk and milk products. Many fruits and vegetables are packed with nutrients yet have few calories.
- includes lean meats, poultry, fish, beans (legumes), eggs, and nuts.
- is low in saturated and trans fats, cholesterol, salt (sodium) and added sugars.
- balances calorie intake with calorie needs.

Food Groups & Numbers of Servings: Menus for meals and snacks should provide the required number of servings from these MyPlate food groups:

- protein (2 ounces per day)
- vegetables (3-5 cups per day)
- fruits (2-4 cups per day)
- enriched or whole grains (6-11 ounces per day)
- dairy (2-3 cups per day)

The amount of food you need to eat from each group depends on your age, sex, and level of physical activity. To learn more about MyPlate, refer to **HGIC 4010, MyPlate**, and www.choosemyplate.gov.

The New American Plate: To be well balanced, two-thirds or more of your plate should contain a variety of plant-based foods (e.g., grain products, beans, fruits, and vegetables). The remaining one-third or less should contain protein, including foods from animal sources (e.g., meats, meat alternates, and dairy foods).

Mini-Meals: Your family's on-the-go lifestyle may mean that you "graze" on several mini-meals daily instead of three meals and two snacks. Eating five or six mini-meals can be as healthful as three meals a day. This is the customary eating style in many places outside the United States.

Add Variety to Every Meal

It has been said that "we eat with our eyes." Create visual appeal and prevent boredom in your meals by including a variety of foods from every food group. This is also the best way to get all the nutrients your body needs daily. Choose foods of contrasting colors, textures, flavors, sizes,

and shapes.

Whether you spend all day or only 15 minutes preparing a meal, its presentation makes it a success. Follow these guidelines to give your meals more plate appeal.

Color: For visual appeal, try to use two colorful foods in every meal. A meal of turkey, green beans, whole-wheat bread, orange slices, and milk looks better on the plate than monotone turkey, rice, cauliflower, white bread, pears, and milk.

Generally, color is a clue that fruits and vegetables are good antioxidant sources. Eat the most colorful fruits and vegetables to increase the nutritional value of your diet and to make meals more visually appealing. Choose red, orange, deep-yellow, purple, and some dark-green leafy vegetables every day. Color groups of foods may help the body in the following ways.

Blue/purple: lower risk of some cancers; urinary tract health; memory function, and healthy aging.

Green: lower the risk of some cancers, vision health, and strong bones and teeth.

Yellow/orange: lower risk of some cancers; a healthy heart; vision health, and a healthy immune system.

Red: lower risk of some cancers; a healthy heart; memory health, and urinary tract health.

Texture: To add interest to the meal, include foods that are crisp, soft, crunchy, chewy, and smooth. For example, a crunchy green salad compliments a plate of spaghetti and meatballs.

Flavor: This can range from sweet to sour, bland to spicy or savory. Combine a bland flavor with a zesty one. Bring out the taste of food with spices, herbs, and other flavorings. However, limit the number of mixed dishes served at one meal. Serve sliced tomatoes instead of a tossed salad with a main dish casserole.

Sizes & Shapes: To make meals more attractive, use a mixture of sizes and shapes, such as big, small, round, and square. To accomplish this, serve foods whole, sliced, cubed, shredded, or mashed.

Temperature: Choose from cold, warm, cool, and frozen. Provide a contrast in temperatures. Serve hot foods with cold food (e.g., baked chicken with chilled fruit salad).

Aroma: Prepare foods that smell good. Appetites are stimulated by smelling spices such as cinnamon, onions sautéing, and bread baking.

Balance: Serve some light dishes and some hearty ones. If the main dish is a hearty stew, accompany it with fruit, such as strawberries or pears.

Arrangement: Food should look good, delicious, and appealing on the plate. A pleasant table setting enhances the appearance of food.

Choice: Select foods you know your family will eat and are within your budget. Use fruits and vegetables that are in season or on sale. Serve different forms of foods: fresh; canned; frozen and dried. Don't be afraid to try new foods.

Portions: Serve portions that follow the recommendations in MyPyramid, USDA's latest food guide pyramid.

Keep It Simple

Foods that are fast and easy to prepare can be nutritious, also. By taking short cuts, you can save time and energy and still serve your family healthy food. Here are a few ideas to get you started.

Stock up on Quick-to-Fix Foods: Think convenience. “Speed-scratch” meals are easy to prepare if your pantry, refrigerator, and freezer are stocked with quick-to-fix foods. When your schedule is hectic, you can make a meal in minutes with some pasta, a jar of spaghetti sauce, canned green beans, fruit, and bread toasted with butter and garlic powder.

For a basic list of versatile staple foods to stock in your pantry, refrigerator, and freezer, refer to [HGIC 4225, *Stocking the Home Pantry for Quick Meals*](#).

Prepare Your Own Ingredients Ahead of Time: Cut up vegetables, fruits, and meats, because precut foods are generally more expensive. Cook lean ground meat and refrigerate or freeze it to make tacos, spaghetti sauce, etc.

Use Quick Cooking Methods: Select recipes with few ingredients and that use quick-cooking methods (e.g., broiling, microwaving, or stir-frying).

Do “Batch Cooking”: Cook when you have extra time, such as on weekends. Make soups, stews, or casseroles to freeze for the next week.

Cook One-Dish Meals: A variety of items from different food groups can be combined into one dish (e.g., chicken stir fry with noodles, ham, and spinach quiche, or chicken/broccoli/cheese casserole).

Use “Planned Overs”: Cook extra food as “planned-overs” for later use. Using leftovers saves time and stretches your food budget. Besides, leftover food often tastes just as good, or better, the second time around!

[HGIC 4240, *Quick Meals*](#) has more ideas on making meals in minutes.

Stretch Food Dollars

To learn more about saving money on food, refer to [HGIC 4220, *Stretch Your Food Dollars Part 1: Before Going to the Store*](#); [HGIC 4221, *Stretch Your Food Dollars Part 2: At the Grocery Store*](#), and [HGIC 4222, *Stretch Your Food Dollars Part 3: At Home*](#).

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