Meal Planning 101

Imagine getting home after a long day, knowing that a delicious and healthy meal was only a few minutes away. How would you benefit from planning your meals ahead of time?

Planning meals ahead can help relieve mealtime stress and prevent last-minute trips to the store or drive-through. Like any new habit or skill, meal planning can feel overwhelming at first. By starting small and following some simple steps, you can prepare nutritious and delicious meals that fit your budget and lifestyle!

What Is Meal Planning?

Meal planning means answering, *"what's for dinner?"* once or twice a week instead of every night. That includes shopping and prepping the ingredients for cooking. All you need to do is a few minutes of work come mealtime. The simplest way to approach meal planning is with three steps:

1. Select your meals and recipes.
2. Shop for the ingredients.
3. Prepare those ingredients.

Meal planning does not mean spending hours cooking elaborate meals. It doesn't even mean you need to cook every night. Your plan for the week can be flexible enough to suit your tastes and include pizza night or leftovers. By planning meals ahead, you create more time and ease in your weeknight routine. Even better, planning more home-cooked meals can save money and prevent food waste. A win for you and the environment!

Ask: What do You Want?

Your approach to meal planning will depend on the problem you're trying to solve. Why do you want to meal plan? Do you want to...

- Save money?
- Eat healthier?
- Prevent food waste?
- Preserve your time or sanity?

If you're a beginner, pick one or two goals that matter the most and use those to guide you in the first step of meal planning: picking your menu and recipes.

Meal Planning Step by Step

Step 1: Pick Your Menu and Recipes

Start thinking about your menu two or three days in advance. Here are some tips for picking recipes:

- **Decide how many meals to prep ahead, and how many people you need to serve.** If a recipe makes four servings, but you need to feed six people, you will need to adjust. Plan to cook once and eat twice (or thrice!) by making enough to have leftovers.

- **Pick recipes based on common ingredients.** "Shop at home" first by taking stock of ingredients you already have in your kitchen. This can help reduce food waste and save money. Websites like SuperCook or MyFridgeFood can help you find recipes based on what you have on-hand.

- **Choose recipes that work with your schedule.** Consider how much time you have to cook each night. Will you need to prepare all your meals ahead of time? Or maybe stock up your freezer and reheat meals? On nights you get home late, a 10-hour slow cooker recipe is a better idea than something that needs to cook for an hour. Consider what meals would reheat well for lunch the next day or freeze well to eat again next week.

- **Keep it simple.** Start with meals or recipes you know and enjoy, and only add one new recipe per week. Use pre-cut veggies, microwaveable grains, or other shortcuts as needed. Find recipes in cookbooks or sites like Pinterest, Google, and cooking sites. Organize recipes you enjoy in a book, a spreadsheet, or online organizers like Pinterest, Real Plans, or BigOven.

Step 2: Make a Smarter Shopping List

Go to the store with a list. You'll be more likely to remember everything you need, and save money and prevent food waste. Make your shopping list in three easy steps:

1. Make a master ingredients list that includes all the ingredients in each of the recipes you picked for the week.

2. Next, go through the list and cross off anything you already have in your kitchen. If you picked recipes based on things already in your pantry and freezer, you should be crossing a fair amount off the list. This is the start of your grocery list.

3. Keep a running list of pantry staples as you run out of them. These are things you need every week like cereal, peanut butter, or bananas. Add this "pantry staples" list to your list from step two, and you're ready to head to the store.

Step 3: Prepare your ingredients

Now you have everything you need to create your meals! There's just one more step: getting prepped. The amount of time you spend prepping your ingredients is up to you. The more you prep now, the less time you'll spend in the kitchen later in the week.

We recommend you set aside at least an hour each week for batch cooking and chopping. What you do with that time depends on your recipes for the week. Tasks like washing and chopping garlic, onions, or other vegetables, batch-cooking meats, or roasting vegetables ahead of time can save you time and energy later.

Igniting Action:

What stands out to you as a way for you to save time, energy, or money this week by planning meals ahead of time?
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