

Feel like you're constantly eating fast food?

Find yourself scrambling to decide what's for dinner at 6 p.m. every single night?

Always one ingredient short of making a meal?

If so, you may want to give meal planning a try. We've dished up everything you need to know to make it work for you.

3 BETTER TIME MANAGEMENT

Meal planning does require an up-front investment of time and energy, but it will save you both the rest of the week (or month!).

Meal planning works

4 benefits of meal planning



1 IMPROVED HEALTH

The easiest way to make sure you're eating healthfully, managing your weight or adhering to a special diet is to plan ahead.

2 LESS STRESS

The chore of deciding what you're going to eat day after day is overwhelming. And failing to stick to your nutritional goals is discouraging. Setting aside time to make all your decisions at once can ease those burdens.



4 FINANCIAL SAVINGS

Like most things in life, having a strategy in place can save you money. You'll be more likely to buy what you need and less likely to waste food.

6 meal-planning tips

LOOK AT THE WEEK AHEAD

Note any errands or appointments that may interfere with meal prep. Also, take stock of special occasions that may involve dinner plans: birthdays, holidays, cookouts, etc. Plan simple meals, leftovers or even take-out for busy evenings.

BONUS TIP: Be honest about when you simply won't have time to cook. That way, you can look forward to eating out as part of your plan rather than viewing it as a failure.

USE FAVORITES AS A FOUNDATION

Slot in a few easy go-to meals or weekly traditions (Taco Tuesday, Friday Night Pizza). Then look for an open evening to try a [new or more complex recipe](#) if your schedule allows for it.

BONUS TIP: Start a Pinterest board, Facebook collection or recipe binder to keep track of ideas.

SEE WHAT YOU HAVE ON HAND

Check your pantry, freezer and refrigerator and make note of what you already have. This can help spark meal ideas, save money and help you avoid buying duplicates.

BONUS TIP: Clean out your fridge before you go food shopping to make organizing and finding room for new groceries easier.

USE A WORKSHEET OR CALENDAR

You're less likely to remember and stick to your plan (and get everything you need from the grocery store) if it's all in your head. You can download a free, printable [Create a Grocery Gameplan Weekly Calendar](#).

BONUS TIP: List your activities and meal plans all in one place so you can see how they fit together.



PLAN FOR LEFTOVERS

Build leftovers into your schedule, especially when you have a hectic week or plan to make a favorite meal. It's easy to double a recipe or stretch leftovers by adding a different side the second night.

BONUS TIP: Leftovers make great lunches, so pack them in to-go containers when you're cleaning up and you'll be more likely to grab them the next day.

DO DOUBLE-DUTY

If two recipes share a common ingredient, try to cook it once then use it twice. For example, if you plan to have grilled chicken and vegetables Monday and chicken enchiladas Tuesday, grill the chicken for both on Monday.

BONUS TIP: Make big batches of your favorite sauces and freeze some to use later.



Meal planning for one

Whether you live alone or just do a lot of solo dining, it may seem easier to microwave a frozen meal or pour a bowl of cereal for dinner. But with some specific strategies, you can tailor meal-planning to meet your individual needs.

MAKE ONCE, EAT TWICE

Plan for leftovers. Mix them up by adding a different side the second night or repurposing the ingredients. For example, you can pour leftover chili over a baked potato or nachos and add cheese and sour cream for a new twist.

FREEZE EXTRAS

Freeze individual-sized portions immediately and note the contents and the date. And be sure to check the freezer the next time you meal plan so you can incorporate those frozen meals into your rotation.

VISIT THE DELI

Order small quantities of meat and prepared sides at the deli counter so you'll have appropriate portion sizes. (Bonus: You won't have to make everything from scratch.)

COOK WITH A FRIEND

Consider taking turns making dinner with a friend or start a weekly dinner club that rotates from house to house. It could be potluck or each host could be responsible for making the entire meal.

INVEST IN A TOASTER OVEN

You may be more likely to cook if you don't have to heat up a big oven, especially during the summer. A toaster oven is the perfect size for baking chicken breasts, broiling fish fillets or roasting small portions of vegetables.

Make-ahead meals

Some people, especially those who tend to have busy weeknights, like to make meals ahead of time to ease the burden throughout the week. While this involves a significant all-at-once time investment, it pays off if you want to avoid hitting the drive-through or resorting to convenience foods later on.

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2 POPULAR STRATEGIES

WEEKLY

This approach involves planning, shopping, prepping and cooking the bulk of your ingredients for the week over the weekend. Weekly preppers also tend to make large batches of a base ingredient and use it several times – and wash and cut up fruits and vegetables as soon as they buy them.

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MONTHLY

This approach requires significant freezer space and yields a lot of crockpot and one-pan meals. It also allows you to buy in bulk, saving time and money. To get an idea of what types of recipes work best for this method, check out some of the sample monthly menus available online.



The scoop on MEAL-PREP KITS

Meal-kit delivery services have become so popular that there are dozens to choose from, each with its own niche, whether it's organic ingredients, 30-minute meals, or basic or gourmet recipes. They can be a great way to spice up or supplement your meal planning.

Once you sign up for a service you can customize your options then have the ingredients and recipes delivered right to you in a box. You can choose:

- Meal size (how many people you're feeding)
- Number of meals you want per week
- Delivery dates (you can easily skip weeks)
- Recipes (choose from vegetarian, paleo, gluten-free and more)

Although you still have to cook the meals, you don't have the chore of buying and gathering the ingredients, and many of the ingredients are already prepped and portioned, which means less chopping, measuring and mixing. Plus, you get to try new recipes without having to buy large quantities of unusual or unfamiliar ingredients.

Grocery stores are also cashing in on this trend by offering grab-and-go meal kits.

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