

A beginner's guide to meal planning

Eating and cooking at home can feel overwhelming and time-consuming. The good news is that planning ahead may help to ease the stress, as well as help save time and money.¹

The benefits of meal planning

Meal planning and eating at home doesn't just impact your budget—it can impact your health, too.¹

Potential benefits of meal planning include:

- Healthier food choices²
- More variety in meals¹
- Less money spent on food¹
- Less time spent during grocery shopping and cooking¹
- Reduced stress²

Strategies for successful meal planning

Read below to learn five simple strategies for meal planning. Keep in mind, these are in no chronological order, but simply a combination of methods to make meal planning an effective practice.

Make a menu

Preparing a plan and creating a menu is easier than many people think. Although it requires some time to get started, it may help to save even more time in the long run.

Consider the following tips when preparing a menu:

- **See what you already have** – Check your inventory to know what you already have. Think of ways you can use these foods in upcoming meals. You can also save money when grocery shopping by knowing what you have.
- **Research recipes** – Collect staple recipes you've used and enjoyed and browse new recipes that you'd like to try. Think seasonal (soups and stews during the winter, and fresh salads in the summer), or use coupons to drive what ingredients you want to look for in your recipes. Pick some that interest you to keep yourself motivated!



- **Think about your schedule** – Focus on planning easy meals for busy days. Reserve recipes that take longer for days that you have more free time.
- **Plan to use leftovers** – Keep in mind that recipes with larger serving sizes may be enough to prepare multiple meals. This may help reduce the amount of different ingredients you need to buy and may also save time spent cooking meals. You can also research various recipes that have the same ingredients to use throughout several meals. For instance, leftover ground turkey used for chili one night can be used to make turkey tacos the next night. Remember to take advantage of herbs and spices—foods can taste completely different with a dash of cumin one night and rosemary the next night.

Start your menu by listing your meals for each day, including breakfast, lunch, dinner and snacks. This can be planned weekly or monthly, depending on your schedule.

Note: It may be helpful to start small. Begin with planning one meal each day and work your way up once you are comfortable. Consider trying a weekly theme to help make menu planning easier and add creativity to your meals.



Stock up on basics

When planning ahead, it's important to get started by stocking up on basic ingredients that can be quickly and easily prepared.

Be sure to stock up on the five food groups:

- **Vegetables** – Canned tomatoes, frozen or dried vegetables
- **Fruits and nuts** – Frozen or dried fruit, walnuts, almonds
- **Milk and dairy products** – Liquid, dried or evaporated milk
- **Proteins** – Canned beans, fish, chicken, ground meat
- **Grains** – Oatmeal, rice, pasta

Note: Be sure to discuss any dietary concerns or changes with your doctor.

In addition to the foods from the five basic food groups, it may be helpful to have extra of the following on hand for quick meal add-ins:

- Condiments
- Oils and vinegars
- Stock
- Herbs and spices
- Seeds

Note: Consider using clear storage containers for your food to easily see when you're running low on ingredients.



Keep a grocery list

Creating a list may help keep you accountable for buying only what you need. The good news is there is no wrong way to create a grocery list; however, there are a few tips and tricks to help keep you efficient when it comes to keeping up with your list.

Here are some tips to help make your grocery list easy and effective:

- **Make it visible** – Make your grocery list easy to see and quickly accessible to save time when prepping for a grocery run. You can keep a list on your fridge, on a board in your kitchen or on your mobile phone.
- **Sort your list by market or store section** – Organizing your list by department (e.g., produce, dairy, meat, canned goods, etc.) may help you navigate the grocery store more quickly and save time while shopping. You can also sort your list by market if you shop at different stores for certain items. You can even take an extra step and write down the quantity you need for each item on your list, that way you know exactly how much of that item to get while shopping.
- **Update your list as you go** – The easiest way to keep your list updated is to write it as you go. The moment you see an ingredient in your inventory running low, add it to your grocery list. It is easy to forget to write down what you need, so keeping your list easily accessible may help with this. Plus, you are bound to forget an item or two if you are rushing and quickly compiling a list right before heading to the grocery store.

Keep in mind: When it comes time to shop for groceries, some markets provide services to help make grocery shopping easier, such as grocery delivery and curbside pickup. If you're interested in more information, call your local market or visit the grocery store's website to see what options are available.



Do some meal prep

Meal prepping can help save time by getting you a few steps ahead when it comes time to cook.

A few common meal prep methods include:

- Batch cooking and freezing
- Pre-portioning your meals
- Preparing ingredients beforehand

Keep in mind: Refrigerated foods will last differently, so be aware of the storage life of your ingredients.

Here are some quick tips for food preparation:

- **Stick to a routine** – Although there are different ways to schedule meal prepping, it's important to stick to a routine to help keep the process easy and efficient. There are various times you can meal prep—you can prep ingredients right away once you've returned home from the grocery store, or you can schedule a consistent time to prep your ingredients. For example, you can set Sunday as your meal prep day to prepare your ingredients or meals for the upcoming week.

- **Organize your kitchen for quick and easy use** – Group utensils and cookware close to where they are usually used. For instance, it may be helpful to keep pots and pans close to the stove, and store away equipment that you do not use as often. This may help save time moving around the kitchen for cookware when preparing your meals.
- **Prioritize cooking times** – Schedule the items you cook in relation to their cooking times. Think about how long each food will take to cook and start with the ingredients that have the longest cooking time. This way, you can prepare other items while that cooks. If all of your ingredients cook in about the same amount of time, try starting with the food that will hold up the best after being cooked.
- **Vary your cooking techniques** – Aim toward using different appliances while cooking to help save time and prepare certain foods simultaneously. Having too many recipes requiring the same appliance, such as an oven, may limit how many meals you can prepare at the same time.
- **Clean as you cook** – Try to clean dishes or load the dishwasher as you are cooking to help prevent clutter and feeling overwhelmed during the cooking process. This will help cut down time on cleaning at the end!



Enjoy the fruits of your labor

With some practice, you'll begin to notice which meal planning method works best for you. Don't forget to have fun with your routine to keep yourself motivated!

Consider trying the following activities to keep you inspired:

- Find recipes you'll enjoy, or make your own cookbook.
- Listen to your favorite music while food prepping.
- Take photos of the dishes you create.
- Invite others for a potluck dinner or recipe swap.
- Plant your own garden to experiment with fresh ingredients.
- Try new foods and cooking methods.

Food safety strategies

When cooking and storing meals, it's important to know how to safely manage your food to help reduce the risk of foodborne illness.³

Follow the four basic rules below for food safety:⁴

1. **Clean** – Wash hands and surfaces often.
2. **Separate** – Do not cross-contaminate foods.
3. **Cook** – Cook food to a safe internal temperature.
4. **Chill** – Refrigerate food quickly.

Additional food resources

As you likely know, eating nutritious food is an important part of managing your health; however, for some, getting access to this food is not always an option. If this is the case for you or someone you know, it's crucial to seek help. There are several programs that can help provide food support.^{5,6}

If further assistance is needed, here are some additional resources:

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) www.fns.usda.gov/snap	Veterans Services Organizations www.va.gov/vso
Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program www.fns.usda.gov/sfmnp/senior-farmers-market-nutrition-program	Commodity Supplemental Food Program www.fns.usda.gov/csfp/commodity-supplemental-food-program
USDA National Hunger Hotline 866-348-6479 (TTY: 711), 7 a.m. – 10 p.m. Eastern time	Feeding America Network of Food Banks www.feedingamerica.org/find-your-local-foodbanks
Eldercare Area Agencies on Aging 800-677-1116 (TTY: 711), Monday – Friday, 9 a.m. – 8 p.m. Eastern time www.edlercare.acl.gov	Meals on Wheels www.mealsonwheelsamerica.org

For any other inquiries, the **211 Helpline Center** is also available with social services for everyday needs and in times of crisis, including food support. You can visit www.helplinecenter.org or dial 211 from any phone at any time.

This information is provided for educational purposes only. It is not to be used for medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Consult your healthcare provider if you have questions or concerns.

Notes

References

¹Clemson University Cooperative Extension

<https://hgic.clemson.edu/factsheet/planning-meals-for-a-family/>

²Mayo Clinic

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/nutrition-and-healthy-eating/in-depth/menu-planning/art-20048199>

³United States Department of Agriculture

<https://www.fsis.usda.gov/wps/portal/fsis/topics/food-safety-education/get-answers/food-safety-fact-sheets>

⁴Partnership for Food Safety Education

<https://www.fightbac.org/food-safety-basics/the-core-four-practices>

⁵Humana - Population Health

<https://populationhealth.humana.com/resources/food-insecurity-toolkit/>

⁶Humana - Population Health

https://populationhealth.humana.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Food_Insecurity_Toolkit_2020_-Final.pdf