

# A Beginner's Guide to Meal Planning

When it comes to eating well, meal planning is one of the easiest things you can do to set yourself up for success. The beauty of it is there are no rules and, you can't really mess it up. The key is just to start and to set aside a little bit of time each week to do it. There are so many ways to approach meal planning that, after practicing just once or twice; you'll begin to find what works for you and your family too.

To help you get started, we've broken down some of the basics. We've even included two practice exercises to help you map out your next week's worth of healthy meals!

## Part 1 – Assess Your Eating Situation

Our eating situations can vary greatly from week to week depending on work schedules, after school activities, evening commitments, travel plans—the list goes on. Here are some things to consider as you assess your eating situation.

**How many meals you need to plan for-**Take a few moments to think about what you have going on next week. Taking a quick inventory of everyone's plans will quickly give you a rough idea of how many meals you'll need to get through the week, and how much mileage you can get from each recipe.

**What you have time for-** If you have a crazy busy week coming up, make a mental note to be on the lookout for quick, slow cooker or make-ahead meals that can served up in a hurry. We're big fans of the cook once, eat twice (or thrice) approach.

**Your food mood-** Things like the weather, a change in seasons, and food cravings can impact what sounds good on any given day. Thinking about these things beforehand will make recipe selection process faster and meal times easier on everyone.

**Your grocery budget-** If you want to eat better for less (and who doesn't) think seasonal produce and sales.

### MEAL PLANNING PRACTICE: MAP OUT YOUR WEEKLY EATS

- 1. Grab a pen and paper.** Write the days of the week on the left side of the page and the meals you want to plan across the top.
- 2. Sketch out your weekly eats.** Vague descriptions like *quick dinner*, *leftovers*, or *packable lunch* are fine for now. Don't forget to plan for leftovers and make note of special dietary restrictions here as well.
- 3. Tally them up.** Note how many meals you'll need, grouping together similar ones. For example: *2 quick dinners*, *3 packable lunches*...

## Part 2 – Collect and Calendar your Recipes

Now the fun part! Once you know how many meals you'll need, it's time to find some healthy recipes and fill in your calendar for the week. Here are some tips to help.

**Create a master recipe list**-Having a list of go-to meals is one of the easiest ways to expedite the meal planning process. Consider trying one or two new recipes and use a few old favorites to fill in the gaps. Every time you find a new meal you love, add it to the rotation!

**Find a few new dishes to try**-Finding delicious, healthy recipes isn't hard—you just need to know where to look. Health-conscious cookbooks and food magazines are great but the internet can literally provide millions of healthy recipes at your fingertips.

**Some of our favorite websites for healthy recipes include:**

- The MyFitnessPal Blog – in addition to being delicious the recipes are super easy to add to your food diary
- Cooking Light
- Food Network – Healthy
- Clean Eating
- Eating Well
- Healthy food blogs like Skinnytaste, Eating Bird Food, Kath Eats, Cook Smarts, and Fannetastic Food
- Pinterest (Midlands Weight Loss Surgery)

**Save and organize your recipes**

***For online recipes:***

- Add them directly to your MyFitnessPal recipe box, either on the web or within the app. Our new recipe tool will even calculate the nutrition facts for easy logging later.
- Create a healthy recipe Pinterest board. Check out ours for meal inspiration
- Check out Paprika, Plan to Eat or ChefTap, or more basic note clipping apps like Evernote

***For paper recipes:***

- A simple, three-holed binder with some plastic sleeve inserts are great for organizing recipe cards and meals pulled from magazines
- Use bright colored tabs to flag favorite cookbook recipes

**Create your meal calendar**-Regardless of what format you prefer, the key here is to fill in your calendar with specific meals. Meal planning pro and Cook Smarts founder, Jess Dang, says, “Good meal planning is like putting together a puzzle. Try to avoid selecting different recipes that don't fit together or else you'll be buying a lot of different ingredients. Select one, look at the ingredient list and let that help you select recipe #2, and so on.”

Whether you use a simple notecard, a printable template or prefer a digital version, it's a good idea to keep a paper copy of your calendar in plain view. “Making your meal plan visual may hold you more accountable for executing on the cooking. Plus, your family isn't constantly asking you, “What's for dinner?” They can just refer to the board,” adds Jess. If you need some ideas, check out Pinterest for visual meal planning boards.

If you prefer digital, create a sub-calendar for your meal plan in Google, Outlook or your calendar application of choice and share it with family members or roommates so everyone knows the plan.

**Write your grocery list**-Save yourself some time and write your grocery list *while* you fill out your calendar—and don't forget to jot down quantities for each ingredient. Before you head to the store take a quick inventory of what you have on hand and cross off the ingredients you don't need to purchase.

## MEAL PLANNING PRACTICE: COLLECT & CALENDAR YOUR RECIPES

- 1. Start a master recipe list.** Digital versions (like a note on your smartphone) are handy, easy to update and usually within arms reach!
- 2. Fill in your calendar.** Pick some favorites from your master list and 1 or 2 new recipes to try.
- 3. Write your grocery list.** While doing that, jot down ingredients for each recipe. Then, take stock of what you already have on hand before heading to the store.
- 4. Pick a time to shop.** Once your shopping is done, you're ready to tackle food prep.

## 1 Hour to Food Prep: Your Fast, Easy Plan for Success

When hunger hits, having a fridge and pantry stocked with nourishing foods that are ready to eat, or cook, can mean the difference between noshing on something nutritious and hitting up the drive through for a fast food fix. In addition to helping you eat better, food prep can save time, money, and help keep things sane in the kitchen.

Along with a little meal planning, spending as little as one hour in the kitchen each week can help set you and your family up for a week's worth of healthy eats. This food prep guide has everything you need to know to get started: beginner tips, equipment essentials, a step-by-step outline and even some food prep hacks for when you don't have a full hour to spare.

### 5 Food Prep Tips for Beginners

- 1. Find what works for you.** Some people will shop and prep all of their food for the week in one afternoon. Others find it more manageable to prep the night before for the next day.
- 2. It's okay to start small.** If you're new to food prep, begin with prepping just one series of meals—say, salad fixings or breakfast egg muffins you can eat throughout the week. Once you've mastered that, add on one more.
- 3. Prep before putting the groceries away.** If you have the time and can save yourself the hassle of having to put all everything away twice, do it! You'll be more motivated to prep foods while they're still sitting on the counter.
- 4. Keep your meal plan and recipes within arms reach.** You'll most likely need to reference them at least a couple of times as you go.
- 5. Remember, it's not all-or-nothing.** Don't think you need to wash, chop and pre-cook everything for an entire week in one-go. Prepping and portioning food for cooking later, or even for one weeknight meal is better than doing nothing at all.

## FOOD STORAGE

**Glass and/or plastic containers (with lids!):** Clear containers are preferable as they allow you to see what you have which reduces the likelihood your freshly prepped food will be forgotten. Go for glass if you're planning to reheat in the same container. Wide-mouth mason jars are inexpensive and great for storing chopped fruits and veggies or salad fixings. Less expensive, plastic containers are good for storing foods that won't be heated in them—just opt for BPA-free.

**Plastic bags:** Gallon-size are perfect for storing large quantities of fruits and veggies, marinating meat or freezing leftover soups and stews. Sandwich and snack-size bags are ideal for smaller quantities. Freezer bags are thicker than regular plastic bags making them more resistant to moisture and oxygen, making your food less likely to get freezer burn.

**Disposable freezer pans:** These are great if you're planning on freezing ready-to-bake casseroles, pasta dishes, marinara and more.

### Step-By-Step: 1 Hour Food Prep

Once you've planned out your weekly meals, done your grocery shopping, and got all of your tools in place, set aside a chunk of time to devote to food prep. While everything may not finish cooking in 60 minutes or less, here's an overview of what you can tackle in just **one hour**.

- 1. Tackle time-consuming proteins**-Get your meat marinating (just freeze if you won't be cooking it within a few days) or pop some chicken in the slow cooker with a little bit of broth for easy shredding/chopping in 3-8 hours time.
- 2. Get your grains and beans cooking**-Cook up a big batch of brown rice, quinoa or some dried beans to eat or cook with throughout the week. Once your grains and legumes have cooked and cooled, either transfer them to a large container or divide into individual servings (typically 1/2–1 cup) topped with your batch-baked veggies and proteins for balanced, on-the-go meals.
- 3. Wash, peel and chop fresh fruit and veggies**-(with the exception of berries which are best if washed just before eating). Chop like ingredients in one fell swoop. For example, if you need 3 diced onions for 2 different recipes, dice them all at once and divide as needed. To save on food storage containers, consolidate chopped produce that can be cooked or eaten together. For salad fixings, put washed greens into an air-tight plastic bag to keep crisp and divide veggie toppings into individual containers for fast salad assembly later. If time is an issue, opt for pre-chopped fruits and veggies.
- 4. Batch-bake veggies and proteins**-Pre-cooked veggies and protein make great brown bag lunches and quick dinners after a long day. Preheat your oven while you prep your meat and veggies.

**Prep-ahead proteins:** fish, chicken (whole or sections), pork or beef tenderloin, hard-boiled eggs

**Oven-friendly veggies:** potatoes, asparagus, broccoli, brussels sprouts, winter and summer squash, cauliflower, eggplant, green beans, bell peppers

**5. Tackle the little stuff—if time allows**-Make homemade marinades and salad dressings for later in the week. Measure out spices, squeeze and zest fresh citrus, chop fresh herbs and garlic in advance.

**6. Prep the night before**- It's perfectly okay to divvy up your food prep into several smaller sessions. Keep your weekly meal plan in plain sight as a reminder for what you need to prepare for the next day.