

The Top 5 Reasons to Prepare Meals at Home

1

Foods prepared at home are often lower in calories, sodium, and saturated fat when compared to commercially prepared foods.

2

You're in charge. Add as little or as much spice as you like. You can leave the onions on or off. You really can have it your way!

3

You can save money when you make it yourself.

4

You can plan balanced meals and control portion sizes.

5

Preparing meals at home is a great opportunity to involve the entire family. Children can help with simple, age-appropriate tasks such as measuring ingredients. This involvement will teach them valuable cooking skills and will increase their interest in trying new foods they might normally refuse to eat. Research has shown that kids are more likely to sit down to a family meal and try a new dish when they helped prepare it.



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March is National Nutrition Month

Food for Thought: Good Nutrition Begins at Home



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It's 5:00. You're stuck in traffic, you're tired, and you're hungry. You want to have a healthy meal when you get home, but you don't want to spend much time fixing it.



Sound familiar?

Most of us juggle busy schedules, so we want meals that are quick and easy. As a result, we often rely on convenience foods. Unfortunately, many convenience foods (products that require little or no preparation such as frozen meals, take-out, and fast food) are less nutritious and more expensive than similar foods prepared at home.

The good news is that you can improve nutrition and reduce costs by making your own "fast" foods. Preparing tasty and healthy meals at home can have a positive impact on your family's health.

Tips to simplify meals at home

Make your own frozen foods

Set aside an hour or two each week or month to prepare a few dishes that can be frozen for a quick meal later.

Freezing tips:

- Be sure to check the temperature of your freezer; 0°F or below is recommended.
- Wrap food in plastic wrap, foil, freezer paper or freezer bags; seal well.
- Chili, soup or stews can be frozen in plastic containers. Leave room at the top of the container because food expands as it freezes.
- Label foods with name and date of preparation. Use the oldest food first for best quality.
- To defrost food before using, place frozen food in the refrigerator the night before desired use. Do not defrost on the counter.

Take advantage of a slow cooker

A slow cooker is a great time saver. Use it to make a home-cooked meal with little effort. Add your ingredients in the morning, turn it on, and hours later dinner will be ready.

RECIPE IDEA

Salsa Chicken

Put 4 boneless chicken breasts, 1 16-oz jar of salsa, 1 cup frozen corn and 1 can of low sodium black beans (rinsed and drained) in a slow cooker in the morning. Cook on low for 6-8 hours.

Shred the chicken breasts with a fork (they will be very tender). Serve chicken mixture as filling for whole-wheat tortillas. Add low-fat grated cheese, tomatoes, lettuce or diced green onions if desired. Freeze leftovers for another day.

Use a little help from the store

Healthy shortcut products can save preparation time.

- Use canned tomatoes (no salt added), crushed garlic, and olive oil to make a quick pasta sauce. Serve with fresh or frozen whole-wheat ravioli, which can be boiled and ready to serve in minutes.
- Keep your favorite frozen vegetables on hand when you need a quick side dish or want to jazz up a sauce, soup, pasta or rice dish.
- Check the Nutrition Facts panel on food labels. Compare calories, sodium, saturated fat, fiber, etc. to make the best selection. Similar products can vary a great deal by brand.

Have a “go-to” recipe or two

A go-to recipe, especially one that uses five ingredients or less, can save you a lot of time. These recipes are perfect for nights when you haven’t planned anything in advance and you need a quick, healthy meal. The key to success is to keep the ingredients on hand.

Healthy ideas can be found at:

<http://hin.nhlbi.nih.gov/healthyeating>.

Leftovers are helpful—take advantage of the possibilities!

Some people grumble at the thought of leftovers because they think it means eating the same meal twice. This isn’t necessarily true. There are many creative ways to use leftovers. For example, if you have roasted chicken and potatoes one night...

- Use leftover chicken in enchiladas for dinner the next day.
- Dice leftover potatoes and toss them into an omelet for a hearty breakfast or a simple supper.
- Top a green salad with leftover chicken, sliced almonds and grapes for lunch.



Minimize prep time/cleanup

- Prep ingredients in advance. For example, chop vegetables on the weekend or the night before you plan to use them.
- Look for recipes that call for combining ingredients in one pot or skillet.
- Prepare multiple meals at the same time.
- Take advantage of parchment paper and foil. You can make packets with chicken or fish, vegetables and seasonings. Bake the packets in the oven for a complete meal with no mess.

Suggested ingredients to keep on hand

- ✓ Whole grain pasta, bread, and tortillas
- ✓ Brown rice (instant or regular)
- ✓ Frozen vegetables
- ✓ Lean meat, poultry or fish (frozen)
- ✓ Canned low sodium beans (black, kidney, and garbanzo)
- ✓ Canned tomatoes, no salt added
- ✓ Low-fat cheese
- ✓ Balsamic vinegar and olive oil
- ✓ Eggs and/or egg substitutes
- ✓ Fresh staples: onions, garlic, and salad greens
- ✓ Salsa
- ✓ Plain, unsalted nuts