

Meal Planning Made Simple

By Jennifer Lintz, RD, LD

For many, just thinking about meal planning is overwhelming. With a little pre-planning, though, it can be a fairly quick process that saves both time and money. The hardest part is getting started and making it a habit. In this article, I will highlight several benefits of meal planning and share strategies for doing it efficiently.



Benefits of Planning

Below are a few reasons you might add meal planning to your weekly routine.

- **To save time.** Carving out 30 to 60 minutes to plan meals once per week is an investment that will save you both time and stress. Entering the supermarket with a plan will likely lead to more efficient shopping and reduces the need to make multiple trips to the grocery store throughout the week. It also eliminates the need to ask, "What should I make for dinner?" after a long day at work.
- **To save money.** In terms of dollars and cents, planning meals allows you to buy only the essentials while also cutting down on the amount of spoiled and expired products that end up in the trash. Additionally, making more meals at home can help you spend less on fast food and restaurant dining. Finally, planning can translate to smaller grocery bills, provided you stick to your list.
- **To eat more nutritiously.** In my experience both personally and professionally, planning is the secret to good nutrition. If left to chance, well-balanced meals may or may not end up on the table. However, if you take time to think about a few options you could make throughout the week and base your grocery list on those meals, odds are good you will follow through.

Getting Started

If you are interested in meal planning, but aren't sure how or where to begin, here are some tips to consider.

1 Map out your week.

Before going to the grocery store, jot down a draft schedule for dinners. Start by listing the days of the week ahead and make a note of any nights you may be away from home. Also, mark the evenings you will be short on time so that you can plan for quick recipes, leftovers, or freezer meals on those days. Save complicated recipes for days you know you'll have more time. Here is an example of what your game plan might look like.

Dinner

| | | |
|-----|------------------|---|
| M | Leftovers | (Chili & Side Salad) |
| T | New recipe | (Lemon Pepper Salmon, Brown Rice & Green Beans) |
| W | Freezer meal | (Slow-Cooker Pot Roast, thawed...make on weekend) |
| Th | Quick meal | (Canned Chicken Taco Salads) |
| F | Restaurant | |
| Sat | New recipe | (Apricot Pork Tenderloin w/ quinoa & broccoli) |
| Sun | Grandma's house! | |

2 Brainstorm Ideas.

After you determine a plan for dinners, jot down a few items you would like to have on hand for snacks, breakfast, and lunches. Dinner is definitely helpful to plan, but it is also important to think about foods you can quickly grab in the morning, take to work for lunch, and munch on throughout the day.

3 Make an organized list.

To make your shopping experience smoother, create your list based on the layout of the grocery store. Have your recipes handy for this step to ensure you don't forget anything and check your cupboards to avoid buying something you already have. Here is an example:

| | |
|--------------|---------------|
| Produce | Miscellaneous |
| Deli/Meat | Frozen |
| Canned Goods | Dairy |
| Dry Goods | |

4 Shop.

After you've made your meal plan and shopping list, head to the store. For a less stressful experience, try to shop when others might not. Stick to your list to promote healthy eating and to save money. If kids are along for the ride, keep them busy by turning the trip into a game or scavenger hunt and have them help you find foods you need, aisle by aisle.

5 Get ready for the week.

After you put the groceries away at home, take a few minutes to set yourself up for a successful week. Throw out expired foods in the refrigerator and cupboards, post your meal plan in the kitchen, and enjoy the comfort of knowing a plan is in place! If you really want to be ready for the days ahead, portion out snacks such as nuts and crackers into bags so that when morning comes, you just need to grab and go.

Need a quick & delicious dinner idea?
Check out the easy crowd-pleaser below!

{Find more recipes at Hormel.com/Recipes}



serving suggestion

Hot & Hearty Chili Pizza

INGREDIENTS

- 1 HORMEL® Chili Cheese Dip Kit
- 2 (12-inch) pre-baked pizza crusts
- 1 cup diced tomatoes
- 2 cups shredded lettuce
- Corn chips, black olives and diced onions, if desired.

DIRECTIONS

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees.
2. Spread the cheese sauce over the pizza crusts. Spoon chili over cheese sauce.
3. Bake 10 to 12 minutes.
4. Top with diced tomatoes and shredded lettuce. Top with corn chips, olives and diced onions, if desired.

Other Tips

Here are some other suggestions to keep in mind throughout the meal-planning process:

Balance convenience with homemade.

Remember, meals do not have to be complex to be nutritious. On nights when you're wildly busy, remove the pressure to make a complicated homemade meal. Instead, use convenience foods to make traditional meals a little bit simpler. Here are some ideas:

Chicken pot pie made with canned chicken and frozen vegetables

Pizzas made on a whole wheat tortilla or English muffin with turkey pepperoni

Pork roast in the slow cooker with a side of ready-made mashed potatoes

Look for inspiration.

Start collecting recipes that appeal to your tastes and your schedule from e-newsletters, magazines, Pinterest, food company websites, and cookbooks to get you thinking about meals you can make from scratch. Be sure to save the big hits so that you can use them again and again.

Keep a running list.

Consider making a blank grocery list as soon as you get home from the store. That way, as you use items up (spices, paper products, etc.) you can write them down right away to ensure they will make it into your cart the next time you're at the store.

Meal planning can definitely be challenging at first, but give it time.

As a starting point, commit to doing it for a month. By that point, you should have an idea of whether it truly saves you time, stress, and money. In the event you don't find it helpful, you can at least say you gave it a try. Chances are, though, that once you make it a habit and experience the benefits, you'll likely wonder how you ever managed without.

Find other great recipes from Hormel Foods at Hormel.com/Recipes!

