

Meal Time... On Time

Meal Planning Made Easy



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Dinner "On The Fly" Versus Dinner With A Plan

"What's for dinner?"... . It's a question we all know very, very well. We've all been there, glancing at the clock and realizing it's 5 p.m. ; opening the refrigerator and freezer, searching for something that could possibly resemble "dinner," and realizing you're missing a few needed ingredients. So, now you have to grab the kids and run to the store during rush hour traffic, trying to hurry and get back so you can make the dinner and your family can actually eat it before bedtime.

At times like this, meal planning can really save the day. It sounds simple enough – writing out a few meals ahead of time, and maybe you have tried it in the past and found it hard or difficult to stay on schedule, so you gave up. We are going to provide some really helpful tips in this guide to get you back on track and organized when it comes to your family's meals.

Meal Planning Saves Time

You'll find that meal planning will save you a lot of time and energy. Yes, you will have to take the time to make out your list of meals and your shopping lists, but you'll be able to get that done in one block of time. You will no longer have to run around at the last minute, drive through rush hour traffic, or spend a half hour standing in line at the grocery store for a box of spaghetti and a jar of sauce.

This guide will also show you many tricks you can use to get dinner on the table in a flash. You may find that by combining meal planning with these super simple short-cuts will offer you a lot more time to spend with your family.

Meal Planning Saves Money

Not only will you be saving time, but you'll also save money as you begin planning your family's meals. If you have already established a family budget, you may find that your food bill always runs over the amount you budgeted. Last minute trips to the grocery store, take-out, and pizza delivery can get very expensive.

For example, a family of four can easily spend more than forty dollars on a take-out dinner; if that family only ate two take out meals per week, they would be spending over \$300 per month on those meals alone! Now factor in any other trips through the drive-through and the unneeded items your child feels they cannot live without on all those trips to the grocery store. When you begin to plan your meals, you will know in advance what you will be spending on groceries and will have an easier time sticking to a budget. You may be able to cut your food spending by sixty percent – or even more!

You may want to consider taking the difference between what you currently spend on food and the amount you save and put it towards a "family fun fund." For instance, if you currently spend \$600 per month on groceries but find that you only spend \$450 once you start

planning your meals, you can use the extra \$150 towards family activities each month, such as bowling, roller skating or movies. Another idea is to save the extra money all year and use it towards a vacation during the summer.

Meal planning can also be a great tool when it comes to teaching school-age children about money and budgeting. Have them accompany you to the store. Bring a calculator and enough cash to buy the items on your list. Have your children help you find the items on the list and calculate the total price of the groceries. This may make the shopping process a bit longer than if you did it by yourself, but your kids will learn a lot about economics and the value of a dollar.

Meal Planning Methods

There are several ways to start planning your meals, depending on your family's needs, tastes, and budget. If you have ample storage space, you may want to consider "freezer cooking," which is also known as "bulk cooking" and "once a month cooking".

In this form of meal planning, you'll plan your meals for a whole month and complete a month's cooking during one weekend, freezing the entrees. We'll discuss this method in more detail later in this guide. This method can work well if you have a busy family and need quick meals that simply need to be taken out of the freezer, thawed, and heated.

If that type of cooking doesn't appeal to you, you can also plan your meals weekly. This is a very flexible method and you can alter it slightly to fit your family's needs each week. For example, later in this guide we'll discuss short-cut cooking, which combines prepared food and fresh ingredients.

If your family has an extremely busy week, plan several of these short-cut meals ahead of time. You'll have peace of mind throughout your day that your family will have a satisfying meal that night. You won't have to scramble at the end of a hard day to find something to feed them!

The Strategy Session

As with any new project, the hardest part is getting started. To begin, you'll need to sit down, look at your family's tastes, preferences and schedule. You'll want to create your meal plan, shopping lists and recipes.

If your family is on a budget, start planning your meals according to what is on sale at the grocery store each week. Using this method of meal planning, you would look through the store's circular, or "weekly ad," which can usually be found in the local Sunday paper as well as on the grocery store's website.

If the store is running a sale on whole chickens, you may want to buy several and plan on having roasted chicken, chicken stir-fry and a

chicken casserole that week. If ground beef was on sale, you may want to plan for meals such as meatloaf, spaghetti, tacos, and chili.

If you have several grocery stores in your area, you may want to compare the sales at each of them to insure you are getting the best prices available. It will take a little extra time, but the cost savings can definitely make up for it.

To start forming the basis of your meal plan and shopping list, write the type of meat specials the store is offering on 3x5 index cards. For instance, if chicken breast and round steak are on sale, then label one card "chicken breasts" and another card "round steak".

Once your cards are labeled, start brainstorming recipe ideas on each card. For example, on the "round steak" card, write out some of your family's favorite meals that use this type of meat, such as steak sandwiches, beef and broccoli stir-fry, steak fajitas, etc.

If what is on sale at the store each week is less of a concern to your family, you can simply plan your meals according to your family's taste buds.

As you plan your meals, don't forget about breakfast, lunch and snacks. If you have school age children, their school will most likely send home a lunch menu each month. Sit down with your child and decide which days they will be taking cold lunch so you can plan for their lunches when you make out your shopping list.

Don't forget about you and your spouse – what do each of you do for lunch? Do you eat leftovers, make sandwiches, go out to eat? Plan for all those “little items” to make sure your family stays within the food budget.

Keeping Track Of Your Plan

Depending on your level of organization and whether you find yourself to favor plain old paper or fancy electronic gadgets, you can choose to keep track of your meal plan on a simple piece of notebook paper, a calendar that is kept by the fridge or even on your computer.

If you want to be super-organized, one idea is to write out thirty of your family's favorite meals and rotate them during each month. You can continue to do this, in one sitting, for the entire year. Of course, most people do not want to plan that far in advance.

Simply keeping a week's worth of meal ideas on the fridge is good enough for most people. You may want to keep a copy in your purse as well, in case you forget what you are having while you are out and about and want to double-check.

M aking The Shopping List

Once you have a list of the meals you would like to make written down, it's time to make your grocery list. Start by making a list of the items you will need for the meals, keeping track of the "tally amount".

For example, if you have several meals that require ham burger, write out how many total pounds of ham burger you will need. Once you have written out the list of ingredients you are going to need to prepare your meals for the week (or month), start looking through your freezer and cupboards to see what you already have on hand.

As you figure out which items you already have in the house, cross those items off your shopping list. Performing this "item check" is also a good time to check up on staple items, such as flour and sugar. Add the items you find yourself running low on to your grocery list.

Taking the time to perform this simple step will save you money, as you won't be wasting money on things you already had at home. We've all been guilty of letting food sit in the cupboard for so long it went stale or keeping it in the freezer so long it got freezer burnt. When you routinely look for things you need before you head to the store, you'll be more likely to use these items up before they expire.

Navigating The Grocery Store

For some people, going to the grocery store can be a real pain. It can be loud, crowded, and sometimes it seems as though the manager rearranges all the items as soon as you get to know the previous layout. Here are some tips on navigating the grocery store, quickly and easily:

- Try to go to the store on weekdays during the early morning or late afternoon. The store will be busiest during the standard lunch time hours of 12 p.m. – 2 p.m., after 5 p.m., and during the weekend.
- The freshest items, such as fruit, vegetables, meat, seafood, and dairy items, will be found in the perimeter of the store. The inside aisles will contain the packaged food. If you are trying to avoid junk food in your house, fill your cart with items from the outer aisles first. If you already have a full cart, there won't be room for the cookies and chips when you get to that aisle.
- To save money, buy the items from the bottom shelves. The store will place brand name items on the eye-level shelves and the lower priced generic items on the shelves closer to the floor. Believe it or not, brand name companies actually pay the stores to have the eye level shelves, as they know many consumers will simply grab the first box of cereal or bag of chips they see.

- If you are going to try the bulk cooking method of meal planning, you will be buying a lot of food during your trip to the grocery store. Ask older children, your spouse, or a friend to go with you and steer the extra cart(s).
- Many stores carry coupon organizers in the planner section of their home office supplies department. You can stick your shopping list, meal plan, and coupons in it and have everything handy when you're at the store. Some types even have Velcro on the outside, so you can loop it around the shopping cart handle.
- Grocery stores are known for luring people in with sales, special offers, and other marketing ploys. It doesn't matter if you get a great deal on an item if your family won't eat it.

Organizing Your Food

The real work begins when you get home from the grocery store; it's now time to start organizing your food and putting it away. If it's been awhile since you cleaned out your cupboards, you may want to do that the day before you go shopping. Having everything organized will make your meal preparation so much quicker and easier.

Here are some tips on de-cluttering your kitchen:

- Check your expiration dates; if it is past its prime, throw it out

- If an item isn't expired, but no one is interested in eating it, throw it out. Unopened items can be donated to a local food bank.
- Group like foods together; for example, store all canned foods in the same cupboard and all dry goods, such as rice and pasta in the same cupboard.
- Keep drink mixes, coffee, and tea in the same area and keep breakfast cereals, breakfast bars, pop tarts, and other breakfast items grouped together. When you want something, you'll know right where to go to get it.
- Keep regularly used items front and center. You'll save time by not continuously reaching and bending for these items.
- If you pack a lot of lunches, designate a "lunch" shelf or cupboard. Place lunch bags, Ziploc bags, and any lunch food that can be stored in a cupboard (peanut butter, crackers, pretzels, etc) in the same place.
- When you start packing the lunch, you simply open the lunch cupboard, grab your lunch stuff and start packing. Of course, you'll need to walk over to the fridge to grab meats, cheeses, jellies, fruits, and so forth, but having the majority of the items in one place will save you a lot of time.

- Clear out the fridge each week. Leftovers have a short shelf life and you don't want to risk getting sick by eating something that should have already been thrown-out.

Prep Work

Doing some prep work when you get home from the grocery store will save you time and make getting your meals on the table a lot easier. For those that decide to try freezer cooking, we'll have more prep tips for that type of meal planning later in the guide. These basic tips will work great for those that plan their meals weekly:

- Wash and chop vegetables when you get home from the store. If your veggies are in the fridge and ready to use, you'll be more likely to use them. Proper storage will also keep them fresher for a longer period of time. Different vegetables have different storage needs. Here is a link to a storage chart that you can print out and keep in the kitchen:
<http://www.midamerica.com/faqrefrigans1.htm>
- As you are sorting out your groceries, you may want to prepare meal kits. You can find large, inexpensive plastic containers at the grocery store. You simply keep all your ingredients in these storage containers. When it is time to make dinner, just grab your meal kit and you are ready to get cooking.

- For example, to prepare a chicken soup meal kit, fill your large plastic container with a box of chicken broth, a smaller plastic container or Ziploc bag of veggies, and another Ziploc bag with your pre-measured amount of rice or pasta (to make things even speedier, cook the rice and pasta ahead of time, but only do this a day ahead of time. Otherwise, the rice or pasta could get dried out). Store everything in the fridge until ready to use. This is also very helpful if you have teenagers who will be getting the meal started while you are on your way home from work.
- If you are going to try any of the tips laid out in the short-cooking section, such as buying a rotisserie chicken, cut the chicken up into portions when you get home from the store. For instance, if you are going to want a portion of it thinly sliced for fajitas and another portion cubed for a casserole and yet another portion shredded for chicken salad, do this as soon as possible. If you wait, you may get busy with other things and forget. The next day you may be in too much of a rush to do it, and instead of using the chicken as planned, you end up picking dinner up at the drive through (which defeats the whole purpose of meal planning).

Short-Cut Cooking

Short-cut cooking is a way of preparing foods quickly and easily by combining prepared food with fresh ingredients. This allows you to take advantage of the convenience of fresh food, while still enjoying the flavor and health benefits of fresh food. This method is also growing in popularity, and you are most likely preparing some of your meals this way without even thinking about it.

Have you ever bought a rotisserie chicken from the market and made your own side dishes for dinner? Or, have you ever bought a pre-made potato or pasta salad from the deli to serve with the entrée you've had simmering in the slow cooker all day? Well, then you are already familiar with this type of meal preparation.

If your family is going to have an unusually busy week, try planning a few short-cut meals ahead of time. This way, you can go to the grocery store once, have all the food on hand during the week, and get dinner on the table in a hurry.

Menu Suggestions

- **Fresh & Easy Pizza:** Many busy families love pizza; it's quick, easy, and you can get it delivered. Pizza delivery can get expensive, though. It's much cheaper to make your own at home, and if you load it with veggies, you can fool your kids into eating something healthy! Using a ready-made crust such as the Boboli brand will save you the time and trouble of making your own dough. You can also find pizza dough in tubes next to the refrigerated biscuits.
- Speaking of those biscuits, you can opt to use those as "mini-pizzas". Simply separate the biscuits, roll them out a bit and let your kids make their own pizzas. If you want something a bit healthier, try topping whole wheat English muffins with the pizza toppings. If your family enjoys those frozen French bread pizzas, buy a loaf of fresh French bread and make your own using fresh veggies.
- **The Versatile Chicken:** Earlier, we asked if you've ever purchased a rotisserie chicken from the grocery store. This is a versatile ingredient that you can use to prepare many meals. Instead of ordering out to a Chinese restaurant, simply sauté some broccoli, shredded cabbage, chopped carrots, celery and onions; add some of the chicken and serve over cooked rice.

- If your family enjoys Mexican food, you can sauté fresh bell peppers and onions while warming up some tortillas and a can of refried beans. Again, add the chicken, some shredded lettuce, shredded cheese and some sour cream and you have great tasting chicken fajitas. Pasta lovers can add a jar of prepared Alfredo Sauce and cooked pasta to the rotisserie chicken to create their own Chicken Alfredo. Try sautéing some peppers and onions to add to the pasta, make a fresh salad as a side dish, and add a loaf of garlic bread for a great meal.
- Add Flavor To Boxed Foods: Ham burger Helper can be a fine dinner if you add a few fresh ingredients to it or pair it with a big, healthy salad.
- Don't Forget About Canned Meats: There is more to tuna than just sandwiches! Add some bread crumbs, chopped onion and a couple eggs to two large cans of tuna and mix together. Form the meat mixture into patties and pan fry. Tuna-pasta salad is a great summer supper!

Plan Your Leftovers

The term “leftovers” can inspire thoughts of turkey sandwiches, turkey soup, and turkey casseroles that fill the days after Thanksgiving. Leftovers do not have to be that boring, and the simple mention of the word doesn’t have to leave your family running for cover.

In fact, planning for “leftovers” ahead of time can make your meal planning for the week a lot easier. If you are a busy mom, you know how hard it can be to come up with ideas for 3 meals a day, 7 days a week. In this sub-method of meal planning, you can look at your week and create meals that play off of each other.

Menu Suggestions

Spaghetti Sauce: On day 1, make a big pot of spaghetti and meat sauce. When the sauce is done, divide it into 3 portions. For that night's meal, use a portion of the sauce to serve classic spaghetti or a baked rotini dish (mix some cooked rotini pasta into that night's sauce portion and place in a baking dish; top with mozzarella cheese and bake at 350 until cheese is melted).

On day 2, take a portion of the spaghetti sauce and thin it out with chicken broth; add some cooked rice and you have a tomato-rice soup for dinner.

On day 3, again, thin out the spaghetti sauce with a bit of chicken broth – but don't make it too thin; then, add some chili powder, chopped onions and some kidney or chili beans. You can even do this in the morning and let it simmer in the crock-pot all day while you run your errands and chauffeur the kids to their after-school activities. You'll have a great-tasting dinner ready for you when you get home.

Roasted Chicken: On day 1, roast a couple of chickens. That night, you can serve a traditional roasted chicken with stuffing, mashed potatoes, etc. When you are cleaning up that night's meal, clean the meat off of both chickens and split into two more portions.

On day 2, use a portion of the chicken, some fresh veggies, a pizza crust and your favorite pizza toppings to make a healthy pizza. For a

twist, substitute Alfredo sauce instead of traditional pizza sauce and create an Alfredo Pizza.

On day 3, you can combine the chicken with some sautéed veggies and chickpeas; serve over couscous for a Moroccan inspired meal.

Ground Beef: On day 1 brown 3 nights worth of ground beef (the amount will vary, depending on your family's size); once the meat is cooked, separate it into 3 portions. On day 1, add some taco seasoning to the meat and serve tacos.

On day 2, use the meat to make a hearty casserole, such as Shepherd's Pie. On day 3, warm the meat in a skillet along with some tomato sauce, a dash of soy sauce, a bit of brown sugar and paprika along with some chopped and sautéed onions and peppers and you have some easy and delicious Sloppy Joe sandwiches.

What Is Freezer Cooking?

The concept of creating a month's worth of meals in one weekend is known by several different names, such as "freezer cooking," "bulk cooking" and "once a month cooking". There is no doubt about it that this method of cooking requires a lot of planning and a lot of work, but if you have the time and energy to devote one weekend to cooking each month, you can feed your family for an entire month.

Just imagine how stress-free the next few weeks will be, when you'll no longer have to worry about what to serve for dinner. You'll be able to serve your family a great tasting, home-cooked meal each night, and the best part is that the meal has already been made. All you'll need to do is pop it in to the oven.

As you can imagine, bulk cooking calls for bulk shopping. If you have ever been to a warehouse store, you know how much money you can save by buying in bulk. In the past, buying food in such large quantities may have been daunting. You may have wondered if you were ever going to use all that food before it went bad. With freezer cooking, you can shop without worry; when you get home, you are going to assemble all those meals and freeze them. The food simply won't have a chance to go bad!

Plan Your Work And Work Your Plan

By following the earlier menu planning suggestions, you are already armed with a plan. You know which meals you plan on preparing and which food items you need to buy. Now, it is time to stick to your plan and get the work done.

Remember to reserve several hours for shopping and organizing your food. If you try to squeeze your shopping in to the free hour you have between your hair appointment and your cousin's wedding, you are setting yourself up for stress and failure. Take things slow and enjoy your cooking weekend!

The Cooking Day

Your cooking day has arrived! Here are some helpful hints to get you through your big day:

- Get up early and start out by gathering and cleaning your small appliances, such as your crock-pot(s), mixer, food processor, blender, rice steamer, etc. These small appliances can really help you speed up the cooking process.
- Clear off as much cupboard space as possible. You'll need lots of cupboard space to cook, chop, and so forth. And yes, those slow cookers will come in handy, but is it possible to set them up on a table in the dining room or laundry room to save on cupboard space?
- Next, start preparing the meats, as these take the longest to cook. Investing in more than one slow cooker can ease this process. Between your oven and a couple of slow cookers, you'll be able to roast several chickens, pot roasts, pork roasts, and hams throughout the day.
- While your meat is cooking, start chopping your vegetables. It's a good idea to look through all your recipes ahead of time and tally how much of each item you'll need. For instance, let's say you looked over your recipes and you need 7 cups of chopped onion total. It will be a lot easier to chop all the onion at once

and have it ready to use then to keep going back to chopping onions throughout the cooking process.

- Save time by maintaining the “do it once” attitude all day – when you start browning your ground beef, brown all the ground beef you’ll need that day.
- Once your veggies are chopped, start preparing any miscellaneous items, such as sauces, pasta, and rice.
- After your meat has been cooked, start dividing it up into the portion sizes you will need for your meals. For example, if you are planning to have chicken fajitas twice that month and need two separate one pound portions of white meat, separate them from the rest of chicken and place them into freezer containers or freezer bags. When the designated fajita night rolls around, you can thaw a portion and simply add fajita seasoning and fresh veggies.
- If you are planning to make barbecue pork sandwiches, shred your cooked pork roast and divide it into portions, just as you did with the chicken. Then, add your barbecue sauce and freeze your portions. When it’s time to make the sandwiches, simply thaw out a portion overnight and the next day you can put it into the slow cooker and let it simmer all day.

- Now, it is time to start assembling your casserole-type meals. You are not going to actually cook your casseroles, just put them together (no one wants to eat a twice-baked casserole, anyway!).
- For instance, if you were going to make 3 lasagnas for the month, you would take out your lasagna pans and line them with enough foil so that you can bring the foil up over the sides and cover the lasagna when you are done assembling it. Once you have lined your pan, you'll start assembling the lasagnas as you normally would, wrap them in the foil and freeze.

Storage & Reheating Tips

- Stock up on aluminum foil, jumbo sized plastic storage bags, and both gallon and quart sized plastic freezer bags.
- To make the most of your freezer space, try to freeze your foods as flatly as possible. You will be able to stack them on top of each other and fit more food in to your freezer.
- As described earlier in the "assembling casseroles" tip, you'll line the casserole dishes with enough aluminum foil to come up over the sides of the dish. After the casserole is assembled, bring the foil up and cover the casserole tightly, and then wrap it in a second freezer bag.

- Once the casserole is frozen, remove it from the outer bag, pop the frozen casserole out of the dish, and place the aluminum foil wrapped casserole back into the freezer bag. When it is time to cook the casserole, remove it from the freezer and place in the same baking dish to thaw. Once thawed, take it out of the freezer bag and cook. Since it is lined with the aluminum foil, clean up will be a breeze! Simply throw the foil out and wash the dish!
- As you know, a full freezer is more efficient. To prepare your freezer to freeze all the food, wash out your empty milk gallons and fill with water. Place them in your freezer. And if you wanted to quick-freeze something on your cooking day, all you need to do is take out one of the frozen gallon jugs and smack it on some cement to start cracking the ice. Place the cracked ice and the items you want quick-frozen into a smaller camping-type cooler. They'll be frozen in no time!
- Make it a point to label each freezer bag. You can write the name of the entrée and the reheating instructions on a piece of paper and stick it inside the bag, on top of the aluminum foil covered casserole or write the instructions on the bag with a permanent marker. Another idea is to print out the information on packing slip labels ahead of time and just peel and stick as you cook and freeze your items.

- Keep track of the meals you have on hand by placing a magnet mounted whiteboard on your freezer door. If you add three lasagnas, two portions of chicken fajita meal, two beef stews and one ham casserole, write them on your board. As you take things out of the freezer to thaw, erase them. It can be easy to forget what you have previously made, and if you don't remember it's there, you'll never be able to use it!
- If you don't have a deep freeze, try bulk cooking in two-week inventories. By freezing things flatly you should be able to store two weeks worth of food in a normal sized freezer.
- Soup can be a simple but very hearty and satisfying meal. When it comes to freezer cooking, simply freeze the ingredients. Frozen soups can lose their consistency when reheated. If you make your own broth, you can definitely freeze that. Add a package of frozen broth and a package of frozen chicken broth to one jumbo storage bag and label "chicken soup". When it's time to eat the chicken soup, simply thaw the broth and chicken. Add your veggies the day you will actually eat the soup.
- If you find your family doesn't like a certain ingredient after it's been frozen, simply omit that item and add it to the dish as you are cooking it for that night's supper.

- If your dish calls for pasta, remember to assemble it with slightly undercooked pasta. The pasta will finish cooking when you reheat the dish.

Recipe Suggestions

Noodle Stroganoff

1 lb cooked ground beef
1 large can (8 oz) canned mushrooms
1 can beefbroth

Simply bag together; and then label and freeze.

To Serve: Thaw beef mixture, and add 3 cups of cooked noodles. Add some beefbroth to make the mixture saucy (the amount to add will depend on your family's tastes. To finish, stir in 1 cup of sour cream

Shepherds Pie

2 cups cooked ground beef
1 can tomato soup (concentrated)

Combine and freeze; don't forget to label your freezer bag!

To Serve: Thaw the meat mixture and put into a 1.5 - 2 quart casserole dish. Add 1 can of your favorite veggies, such as corn or green beans. Spread 6 cups of mashed potatoes over the meat and veggies and top

with a cup of grated cheddar cheese. Bake at 350 degrees for 30-40 minutes or until the casserole is melted.

Basic Meatloaf

2 lb uncooked ground beef

1 cup bread crumbs

1 egg

½ cup of minced onion

½ cup of milk

Combine ingredients until mixed together. You can double and triple the basic ingredients and make one huge bowl of this, and simply divide into portions. Add to freezer bags, label, and freeze.

When ready to make, simply thaw, add to a loafpan, top with ketchup and bake at 350 for about an hour.

You can also get creative with this recipe by dividing the thawed meatloaf mixture into two equally sized portions. Layer the first portion into the bottom of the loafpan and top with garlic or cheese flavored mashed potatoes. Top with second layer of meat mixture and bake as directed.

Chicken Tetrazzini

3 cups cooked, diced chicken

12 oz spaghetti, cooked until almost tender and drained

3 cups shredded cheddar cheese

1 cup of diced onion

1 can cream of chicken soup, condensed

1 can cream of mushroom soup, condensed

1¼ cup milk

Sauté onions; mix all ingredients together into in a large bowl. Divide into 2 freezer bags, label and freeze.

To serve: Thaw mixture and put into baking dish. Top with some bread crumbs and a bit more shredded cheese. Bake uncovered at 350 for 30 to 40 minutes, or until cheese on top is melted and bread crumbs are browned.

King Ranch Chicken Casserole

1 can cream of mushroom soup, condensed

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup of your favorite salsa

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup sour cream

1 tablespoon chili powder

2 medium tomatoes, chopped

3 cups cooked, diced chicken

12 corn tortillas, cut into 1 inch pieces

1 cup shredded "Mexican blend" or "taco blend" cheese

Combine the soup, salsa, sour cream, chili powder, tomatoes and chicken. Line a casserole dish with enough foil to fit over the sides of the dish. Layer half of the tortillas in the bottom of the foil-lined dish; top with half of the chicken mixture; repeat layers and sprinkle with the shredded cheese. Bring up the sides of the foil to cover the casserole. Freeze; once frozen pop out of casserole dish and place in a freezer bag. Label and date your bag.

When ready to serve: Thaw casserole and bake at 350 for 40 minutes

Salsa-fried Sloppy Joes

4 lbs hamburger

2 cups salsa

2 (16 oz) cans tomato sauce
4 tbsp brown sugar
salt, pepper, and garlic powder to taste

Brown the ground beef, and add the remaining ingredients, stirring well. Bring mixture to a boil, then reduce heat and let simmer for 20 minutes. Let cool, then separate into 4 portions and freeze.

When ready to use, thaw and add to large sauce pan; let sit over medium heat until warmed through. Serve on ham burger buns.

Ham Omellets

6 eggs
Salt and pepper to taste
4 oz cooked ham, diced
2 oz shredded cheese
1 tbsp olive oil

Mix together the eggs, salt and pepper. Once mixed, add the ham and top with cheese. Add the egg mixture to a fry pan that has been preheated and lightly coated with the olive oil. Cook gently for about three minutes, and then place under broiler for one minute.

Gently slide the omelet onto a buttered piece of aluminum foil. Allow omelet to cool, then wrap with aluminum foil, place in a freezer bag and freeze.

To serve, place frozen om elet into a buttered ovenproof dish, cover lightly with foil and heat in a 350 degree oven for 25-30 m inutes.

Chinese Orange Chicken

3 lb whole, roasting chicken

2 tbsp cornstarch

2 large oranges

1¼ cups water

1 onion, diced

Roast the chicken, reserving the juices. Once cooled, remove the meat from the bones and place the meat into a bowl. Cut oranges in half and squeeze to "juice" them. Combine the orange juice and cornstarch in a medium saucepan, mixing well. Add water, the juices from the chicken and the onion. Bring mixture to a boil and let simmer until thickened. Once sauce has thickened, pour it over the chicken and let cool. Place in freezer bag or container and freeze.

When ready to serve, thaw and place in saucepan; place the saucepan on medium heat until warmed through.

French Toast

5 eggs

1¼ cups milk

1 ½ tbs sugar

½ tsp salt

1 tsp cinnamon

1 tsp vanilla

16 slices white bread

Preheat oven to 500. Combine eggs, milk, sugar, salt, vanilla and cinnamon. Dip the bread slices into the egg mixture, then place on baking sheets (you may want to spray the baking sheets with non-stick baking spray or lay parchment down to make removing the bread easier). Bake bread slices for 5 minutes, or until the bottom is golden brown. Turn the slices over and cook an additional 2 minutes. Let the bread cool, and then freeze in single layer. When the bread is frozen, you may wrap each slice individually or place them all in a freezer bag.

When ready to cook, simply take a slice out of the freezer, pop it into the toaster and toast to your liking.

Some Additional Freezer Cooking Tips

- **Partner Up:** If you have a family member or friend who is interested in freezer cooking, partner up with them. It will be easier to get started when you have someone to cook with. Together, you can brainstorm new recipes, scope out the best deals at the store, and of course, share in the work.
- **Keep Notes:** As you start freezer cooking, keep a notepad handy to jot down any notes. If you find a certain recipe works better with a different ingredient, jot it down. If you find yourself going through more quart sized freezer bags than you planned for, write it down. When you begin your meal planning for the next month, you can look back at your notes and be better prepared. Plus, you'll want to note which entrees your family loved, and which ones didn't go over as well.
- **Pare Down:** If you find that planning and cooking your meals for a whole month to be too much work for one weekend, simply pare down. Try cooking 15 entrees instead of 30. You will still have two weeks of meals ready to go. Or you can just take a weekend to make several things your family enjoys. For example, if your family loves lasagna or a certain type of casserole, make a few of them and stick them in the freezer. When you are having a busy week and need a quick dinner,

simply take a lasagna out and let it thaw in the refrigerator overnight and pop it into the oven when you're ready to eat.

- **Ask For Help:** Depending on the age of your children, they may be able to help you plan, shop, and cook. If you have an infant or toddler and want someone to help keep them busy while you are cooking, ask a young teen from your neighborhood to come over and help you keep an eye on them. A younger teen will normally charge less than older, more experienced babysitter would. You'll be on hand if your child needs you, and it could be a good idea to start building relationships with the young teens in your area, as they will be the prime "babysitting age" as your child grows.
- **Keep Trying:** If your first attempt at freezer cooking doesn't quite go as planned, keep trying. You probably weren't the world's greatest driver the first time you drove a car, and I'm sure your first attempt at writing looked pretty indecipherable, but I can pretty much bet that you write something legible down everyday and, unless you live in New York City, you probably drive a car just about everyday, too. With a little practice, you could just end up being the town expert on freezer cooking.

More Meal Planning Tips

- **Ask For Suggestions:** Simply figuring out what to make for dinner can be harder than the cooking and cleaning up. It isn't easy trying to think of something that everyone will like, and that you haven't already ate three times in the last month. If you run out of ideas for what to cook, ask your family for suggestions.
- **Watch Cooking Shows:** Watching the shows on the Food Network can be a great way to learn new cooking methods and techniques, inspire ideas for new recipes, and can simply be quite relaxing. If you haven't already got a favorite cooking program or "TV chef," tune in and see what new tips you can learn.
- **Experiment And Have Fun:** Preparing your family's meals doesn't have to be a chore; it can actually be quite fun. As you plan your meals, experiment with new foods, flavors, and textures. If you normally have sandwiches for lunch, try wraps instead. If your family's routine was stuck in a rut of ham burgers, hot dogs, pizza and spaghetti, break out of that routine in a big way and try Pasta Primavera or a Beef and Broccoli Stir Fry. You'll never know what your family will and will not like until you try it.

- **Get Everyone Involved:** One of the best benefits to meal planning is that you will have more family time. Studies show that families who eat meals together are happier and more connected. Get your family involved in the process, whether it is helping you cross items off the list at the grocery store, chopping vegetables, setting the table or washing the dishes. Everyone should be doing their part!
- **Have Theme Nights:** Since you are planning your meals and know what you will be having for dinner from one day to the next, you can get creative and have "Theme Nights". If you are going to have a Chinese-inspired entrée, create a fun environment by setting out chopsticks and hanging paper lanterns. Having a Mexican dinner? You can find a piñata at a party supply store and fill it with a few small treats and let your kids have fun whacking it open.

Wrapping It All Up

As you can see, meal planning can save you time, money, and help you enjoy more time with your family. It can be a great tool in teaching your children about planning, budgeting, measurements, and can even help them learn about different cultures.

Experiment with the different meal planning styles to find a good fit for your family. You will know what works and what doesn't. And you can have a lot of fun (and a lot of great meals) while you figure out.

If you would like to learn more about meal planning, budgeting, saving money at the grocery store, etc, there are some great resources at the end of this guide. Enjoy your meals!

Free Resources

<http://www.mealsmatter.org/> - Meal planning tools, nutrition tips, and more

<http://www.healthyeating.net/health1.htm> - A comprehensive site featuring tips on how to increase your intake of healthy foods

<http://www.fabulousfoods.com/features/bmbag/bmbag.html> - New ideas for packing lunches – great ideas if you are tired of the same old sandwich for lunch

<http://busycooks.about.com/od/cookinglessons/a/mealplanning.htm> - Tips on planning balanced meals

http://www.30daygourmet.com/MessageBoard/MB_Category_Select.asp - Message board for freezer cooking / bulk cooking; find new recipes, ask questions, swap stories

<http://www.queenofkaos.com/at-home-tools/directory.shtml> - A listing of the tools that help me around the house and to keep mealtime on time.



Jan Ferrante
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