



Menu Planning Made Simple

Do you know what you're having for dinner tonight? If so, congratulations! You're probably less stressed, with the ingredients ready and waiting for a healthy meal you actually have time to prepare. If not, you may be dreading coming home to an empty refrigerator, tempting you to give in to pleas for fast food or pizza.

Preparing healthy meals during the week really can be easy if you have a good plan. Here are some tips to help you get started.

What is a healthy meal, anyway?

The USDA's current dietary guidelines can be found on their ChooseMyPlate website (www.choosemyplate.gov), along with a sample menu for adults, specialized tips for kids of all ages and plenty of recipes. Research suggests that over half of our plate should be filled with fruits and vegetables, and that at least half of the grains we eat should be whole grains. The Harvard School of Public Health has weighed in with a recommendation that we add refined grains and red and processed meats to our "use sparingly" category, along with butter, sugar and salt.

Don't forget breakfast!

If you have kids, you've probably explained the importance of eating a healthy breakfast many times. Do you follow your own advice?

Whole grain cereal with milk and fruit is a healthy, easy choice, but here are some ideas to make breakfast a bit more interesting:

- Have homemade muffins in your freezer, made with whole grains and fruit or vegetables (check out recipes for rhubarb and berry nut muffins, blueberry muffins with hazelnuts and pumpkin spice muffins).
- Make a smoothie with fat-free or low fat yogurt, a banana, and your choice of fresh or frozen fruit.
- For a low fat breakfast packed with protein and vitamins, try a frittata or omelet with egg whites and veggies left over from last night's dinner.

Beyond PB&J

With a little creativity, sandwiches or wraps with whole grain bread or tortillas can be nutritious and convenient brown bag staples. Swapping bananas, raisins and/or apple slices for jelly can transform a peanut butter sandwich into a nutritional powerhouse. Shredded carrots, sliced cucumbers, and grilled eggplant or zucchini will liven up your turkey sandwich, or perhaps convince you to skip the turkey all together.

Lunch doesn't have to come between two slices of bread, though. Instead, you can try:

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- **Salad in a jar** – Layer salad ingredients in a glass jar, putting the salad dressing and sturdiest ingredients (shredded carrots, beans, lentils, etc.) at the bottom and the most delicate ingredients (lettuce, spinach) at the top. When it's time for lunch, upend the jar into a bowl and enjoy.
- **Take a dip** – Prepare a healthy, high-protein dip and pack it with cut up vegetables and whole-grain pita wedges.
- **Warm up** – If you have a microwave at work, leftover casserole, chili or soup can make a hearty lunch the next day. If you'd like to pack soup or chili in an insulated container, the USDA recommends filling the container with boiling water first, to heat it thoroughly, and then (after pouring out the water) adding the food while it's piping hot. Close the container quickly and keep it closed until lunchtime to keep the food at 140°F or above.

Dinner in advance

Buying dinner from your store's freezer section is convenient, but commercially prepared frozen meals are often high in sodium and nutritionally out of balance. Why not make your own frozen meals? You'll save money, and you can control the ingredients and add a salad for a tasty, well-balanced meal. Here are some dishes that freeze well:

- **Soups, stews and chilis** – Go vegetarian with white bean or lentil soup, or black bean or sweet potato chili, or add lean cuts of chicken, turkey or beef.
- **Casseroles and one-pot meals** – In addition to your family's favorites, try some new additions, like herbed lentils and rice casserole, spicy pumpkin curry, or black bean and chicken enchiladas.
- **Sauces and meal starters** – Shorten your prep time by stocking your freezer with

meal-sized portions of tomato sauce, marinated chicken or chopped vegetables.

A few warnings:

- Watch out for ingredients that don't freeze well, like cream and ricotta cheese, sour cream and salad greens.
- Wrap, label and date foods carefully before freezing. Frozen foods will taste better if they're frozen quickly, so avoid stacking items in the freezer during the freezing process.
- Move frozen foods to the refrigerator in the morning or the night before to thaw for that night's dinner. Never thaw frozen food at room temperature.

Salads with a shelf life

A green salad with fresh vegetables is healthy, tasty and convenient, but leftovers don't keep too well. Here are a few nutritionally rich salads that you can make ahead of time and keep in your fridge for a few days:

- Quinoa salad with roasted autumn vegetables
- Black beans with corn and tomatoes
- Mediterranean lentil salad

Need more inspiration?

Your EAP member website includes a wealth of articles on healthy nutrition. Through the member website, you also have access to the Wellness Resource Center, a valuable source for healthy recipes.

