



Meal Planning: The How and Why of Planning Your Meals

We've all been there before; standing at a fast food restaurant, or in front of the vending machine, or staring at the last old pack of oatmeal in our desk drawer saved for "emergencies". It's time for your next meal and you forgot to pack a meal, or did not have time for shopping or meal prepping.



Maybe you intended to begin planning over the weekend but became too busy or maybe you were not sure of where to start? In this article, we will discuss not only how to begin meal planning but why it is important.

Why:

Meal planning can help us make sure we are receiving the suggested servings of nutrient dense fruits, vegetables, lean protein, dairy, and whole grains needed to keep our bodies their healthiest. Having our meals and snacks prepped can encourage healthier eating behaviors throughout the day. Instead of relying on the, often unhealthy, choices found in vending machines, at fast food restaurants and other sources of impromptu meals (i.e. box of communal doughnuts); we can pack or plan for healthy, filling options and even some treats.

Menu planning will help you and your family save money and waste less food and use up leftovers! It could also help insert some new recipes into your usual routine built around using what you already have on hand and utilizing a complete grocery list (a byproduct of good menu planning) will help you to only buy what you'll need and will help keep your food costs down.

How:

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 do you have time to prepare? If you have a 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. Try the cook once, eat twice (or thrice) approach.

Reflect on your mood, the weather, or a change in seasons, and how they can impact what sounds good on any given day.

Consider your grocery budget and ask yourself what's on sale, what's available in bulk for a better price, and what's in season? What food or ingredients do you already have on hand?



Image from: <http://bcf-consulting.com>



The shopping is not done until the chopping is done!

Map Your Meals:

1. Grab a pencil 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, etc.). Don't forget to plan for leftovers and make note of special dietary restrictions here as well. Make sure to consider special occasions that may have a meal served, such as date night, holidays, or other events and adjust your plan accordingly.
3. Tally how many meals you'll need, grouping together similar ones. For example: two quick dinners, three packable lunches, etc.

Collect your Calendar and Recipes

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. Health-conscious cookbooks and food magazines are great place to look but the internet can provide millions of healthy recipes as well.

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."

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 or adjust quantities.

Tips:

- Try keeping your meal plan on you digital calendar and don't forget to make time for meal prep or packing meals or snacks. Share it with family members or roommates so everyone knows the plan.
- Keep a paper copy of your meal plan in plain view. This helps you and your family stay accountable and relieves the burden from people asking, "What's for dinner?"

Shopping and Meal Preparation:

Meal planning is a great place to kick start healthy eating habits but requires some preparation to be successful.

Before you go make sure you have your grocery list, coupons, meal plan, reusable bags (if any) and a full stomach so you can stick to your list without your stomach growling and making those unhealthy options seem irresistible.

While at the store stick to your list and do not buy impulse items, this is not to say you should pass up a great deal on an item that you would like to supplement for something in your plan. For instance: chicken is on sale, so you supplement the beef in your chili for chicken.

Try to shop the perimeter of the store (where the produce, bakery, meat/deli, and dairy sections usually are) and avoid the unhealthy snack food and sugary beverage aisles. Attempt to shop alone, it is easier to stick to your list when others are not trying to slip snacks into the cart.

At home begin prepping your meals right away. The shopping is not done until the chopping is done. Look at your plan and prep your healthy snacks or vegetables for the week ahead. For example you could bag up baby carrots for lunches or chop the celery for a tuna salad. Prep as much as possible to make your meals easy to stick to.

A Few Sources for Healthy Recipes:

Food Network: <http://www.foodnetwork.com/healthy.html>

Cooking Light: <http://www.cookinglight.com/food/quick-healthy-recipes>

AllRecipes.com: <http://allrecipes.com/recipes/84/healthy-recipes/>

Weekly Meal Plan for the Week of: _____

	Grocery List:	
Monday: B _____ S _____ L _____ D _____ S _____	Vegetables: _____ _____ _____ _____	Dairy: _____ _____ _____ _____
Tuesday: B _____ S _____ L _____ D _____ S _____	Fruits: _____ _____ _____ _____	Meat/Deli: _____ _____ _____ _____
Wednesday: B _____ S _____ L _____ D _____ S _____	Dry Goods/Canned Items: _____ _____ _____ _____	Frozen Foods: _____ _____ _____ _____
Thursday: B _____ S _____ L _____ D _____ S _____	Pasta/Condiments: _____ _____ _____ _____	Beverages: _____ _____ _____ _____
Friday: B _____ S _____ L _____ D _____ S _____	Bakery/Bulk Grains: _____ _____ _____ _____	Pet/Baby/Household: _____ _____ _____ _____
Saturday: B _____ S _____ L _____ D _____ S _____	Paper Goods: _____ _____ _____ _____	Personal Care: _____ _____ _____ _____
Sunday: B _____ S _____ L _____ D _____ S _____	Cleaning: _____ _____ _____ _____	Other/Rx/Floral/Stamps: _____ _____ _____ _____