

## Meal and Menu Planning

Meal planning is the cornerstone of healthy eating, and having a plan in place can help guide your choices both at the grocery store and in your kitchen. Evenings can be more relaxed and enjoyable when there is a plan in place and you have an answer to the eternal question “what’s for dinner?” As a bonus, having a meal plan can also help you save money with smarter shopping and reducing food waste. It can take a bit of time to create your plan, but your time investment up front will pay off in the end.

Here are some tips for creating your menus, meals, and grocery list:

- **See what you already have on hand.** Look in your freezer, cabinets, and refrigerator. You can save money and reduce waste by using these items in the upcoming week’s meals. Focus on using the most perishable items first- produce and fresh meats- to reduce food waste.
- **Think about your schedule for the week.** Choose meals you can easily prepare when you don’t have much time, and check out the weather for the best grilling days! Consider prepping some foods in advance when you can- cook up extra chicken and veggies for a salad or quesadillas. You also can prepare meals such as casseroles, stews, and some salads in advance to finish off and serve on your busiest days. Take into account special events during the week, including when you might enjoy dinner out.
- **Try a worksheet to plan your meals.** The Create a Grocery Game Plan Worksheet ([www.choosemyplate.gov](http://www.choosemyplate.gov)) is great for planning your meals for the week. You can then use your plan to develop your shopping list, noting the items you may need to buy.
- **Create your list of favorite “go-to” recipes. Try out some new ones, too.** Find new ideas for healthy and low-cost meals based on what you have on hand, foods your family enjoys, and foods that are good buys. To help narrow down your choices, you may want to create “theme” nights. Remember Wednesday is Prince Spaghetti Day, and there’s Meatless Mondays, Taco Tuesday for Latin-themed foods, and so on...
  - **Recipe searches:** Epicurious.com, Cookinglight.com, Eatingwell.com all have great recipes for many types of dishes, from quick and easy to holiday specialties.
  - **Try an app:** *Yummly* allows you to search recipes by ingredient(s), which can make it easier to use up items you have on hand
  - Be sure to include some family favorites along with new recipes.



**Make your shopping list:** You may find it helpful to keep a running list of items that you use routinely, and add the things that you have finished off. Check out what's on sale at your local markets to add to the list, and take these specials into consideration in planning your meals.

- *Needed* allows you to share lists for shopping
- *Cozi* combines a shared family calendar with to-do lists, including shopping lists
- *Google docs* can also be shared by family and household members



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- **Plan to use leftovers.** Think about larger recipes with enough servings for multiple meals. This can reduce the number of ingredients you need to buy, and save you time preparing another meal. Roast chicken can be used for Sunday dinner, and shredded chicken can be added to salads.
  - Cook double batches of staples and freeze the extra, especially if they take a long time to cook: beans, brown rice, wild rice can all be cooked in big batches, and frozen in recipe-friendly 2 cup containers.
  - Brown bagging leftovers for lunch can also save money and reduce food waste; to save time, immediately divvy up your leftovers into lunchtime servings to simplify your morning routine.
- **Share** the meal plan with family members so they can help with shopping and meal preparation. For some, the plan can be posted on a white board or a calendar posted on the fridge, as in the photo below. Others may use an app such as Cozi, or a sharable electronic document, such as on Google docs. An electronic shopping list can be especially helpful if the responsibility for grocery shopping is shared.



Menu planning is a cyclical process or system, repeating on an ongoing basis. With practice, your system can become a habit that can help you eat well and save money.