

Meal Planning: Better Planning, Better Meals

Why is meal planning important? Meal planning has many benefits, and one of the most important benefits is to help you provide healthy meals for you and your family.

What are “healthy” or “nutritious” foods or meals? For the average person, this means a variety of foods consisting of whole-grain breads and cereals, fruits, vegetables, low-fat dairy products, lean meats, and beans. People need more than 40 different nutrients to stay healthy. These nutrients include vitamins and minerals, protein, fat, carbohydrates, and water.

No one food can supply all the essential nutrients in the amounts you need to stay healthy. Proper planning helps you ensure that your body is getting enough of what you need and less of what you do not need.

Plan Ahead

What makes a meal look and taste delicious but is still low-cost and easy to prepare? The secret is planning ahead! Well-planned meals can save time and money and provide the proper amount of nutrients for good health. By planning the week’s or month’s meals ahead of time, you can:

- make a grocery list and stick to it
- take advantage of weekly specials in the supermarket
- clip and use coupons
- reduce food waste and spoilage by eating leftovers

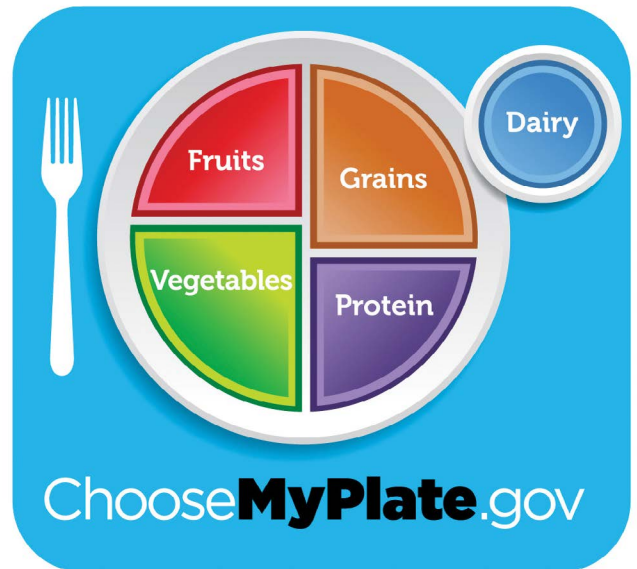
As far as nutrition is concerned, it’s important to include a variety of foods to help you prepare well-balanced and attractive meals. Try new foods often.

Write It Down

Equipped with recipes and newspaper grocery ads, sit down and write out your menus for several days or for a week at a time. At the same time, make your shopping list. The more time you spend planning, the less time you will spend at the grocery store and in the kitchen.

Consider These Points

Contrasts in colors, textures, flavors, temperatures, shapes, sizes, and preparation methods add appetite appeal. When



Use MyPlate to evaluate your meals. The plate shows a balanced meal consisting of grains, fruits, vegetables, protein, and dairy. Remember to choose foods from each food group that contain fewer added sugars and fats.

people eat, all of the senses are involved. Food should taste good, smell good, look good, feel good, and sound good.

1. **Visualize** the meal. Does the meal have variety?
2. **Color.** Choose recipes with colors that complement each other. Avoid choosing foods of the same color.
3. **Flavors** (sweet, sour, bland, spicy). Provide a combination of mild and not-so-mild flavors (e.g., chili and cornbread).
4. **Textures** (crisp, soft, chewy). Serve crisp foods with soft ones.
5. **Temperatures** (hot, cold). Plan a balance of hot and cold foods.
6. **Shapes and sizes** (small, big, round, square). Vary the sizes and shapes of the foods you serve. Leave some foods whole; serve others sliced, cubed, mashed, or cut into strips.
7. **Preparation method** (boil, bake, roast, raw). Do not prepare all of the foods in one meal the same way.
8. You must consider **nutritional needs**. Plan to include the proper number of servings daily.

9. **Food costs** vary. If your food budget is modest, plan to buy and use low-cost foods. Low-cost foods can be just as nutritious, good tasting, and attractive as high-cost foods.
10. Consider **your cooking ability** when you plan meals. Choose recipes that fit your abilities. You don't have to be an accomplished gourmet cook to make and serve well-balanced meals.
11. **Your time** is another factor to consider. You may want to choose easy recipes, or cook foods ahead of time and freeze until needed. Save menus with foods that take longer to prepare for days when you have more time to spare and feel like cooking. You may want to set aside time to prepare several meals at once so you can have food ready for busy days.

Food Groups

You get the nutrients your body needs when you eat foods from each of the different food groups each day. Here is an example of a 2,000-calorie-per-day meal plan. You may need more or fewer calories and food depending on your age, gender, and daily physical activity level (PAL).

Daily Amount of Food from Each Group for a 2,000-Calorie Meal Plan

- **Vegetable Group**
 - 2.5 cup
- **Grains Group**
 - 6 ounce equivalents
- **Meat and Beans Group**
 - 5.5 ounce equivalents
- **Fruit Group**
 - 2 cups
- **Milk Group**
 - 3 cups
- **Oils**
 - 6 teaspoons

How Much?

The **vegetable group** includes all fresh, frozen, canned, and dried vegetables and vegetable juices. Generally speaking, 1 cup of raw or cooked vegetables or vegetable juice or 2 cups of raw leafy greens are equal to 1 cup from the vegetable group.

The **fruit group** includes all fresh, frozen, canned, and dried fruits and juices. In general, 1 cup of fruit or 100% fruit juice or ½ cup of dried fruit is equal to 1 cup from the fruit group.

The **grains group** includes all foods made from wheat, rice, oats, cornmeal, and barley. Examples of foods include bread, pasta, oatmeal, breakfast cereal, and tortillas. In general, 1 slice of bread, 1 cup of ready-to-eat cereal, or ½ cup of cooked rice, pasta, or cooked cereal is equal to 1 ounce from the grains group. At least half of your grains should be whole grains.

The **milk group** includes all fluid milk products and foods made from milk that keep their calcium content. This includes yogurt and cheese. Foods made from milk that have little or no calcium, including cream cheese, butter, or cream are not part of this group. Most milk group choices should be fat-free or low-fat. In general, 1 cup of milk or yogurt, 1½ ounce of natural cheese, or 2 ounces of processed cheese are equal to 1 cup from the milk group.

The **meat and beans** group includes meats, poultry, seafood, beans, peas, eggs, soy products, nuts, and seeds. In general, 1 ounce of lean meat, poultry, or fish; 1 egg; 1 tablespoon of peanut butter; ¼ cup cooked dry beans; or ½ ounce of nuts or seeds is equal to 1 ounce from the meat and beans group.

Oils are not actually a food group. Oils include fats from many different plants and fish that are liquid at room temperature. Canola, corn, olive, soybean, and sunflower are all examples of oils. You should eat foods that include either monounsaturated (MUFA) or polyunsaturated fatty acids (PUFA), while limiting your intake of foods that are high in either saturated fats or trans fats.

A Sample Guide Breakfast

1 cup fruit (vitamin C-rich such as an orange, half a grapefruit, or a handful of fresh strawberries); 1 cup low-fat, high-fiber cereal; 1 cup fat-free or low-fat milk; 1 slice whole-grain bread; and a beverage.

Lunch

A turkey sandwich (2 to 3 ounces lean meat and 2 slices whole-grain bread), 1 cup leafy green salad, ½ cup sliced carrots, 1 banana or similar-sized fruit, 1 cup low-fat yogurt, and a beverage.

Dinner

Skinless, boneless chicken breast (3 ounces lean meat); 1 cup steamed broccoli and ½ cup squash; 1 cup pasta; and 1 cup fat-free or low-fat milk.

Daily Total

Fruits, 2 cups; vegetables, 2.5 cups; milk group, 3 cups; meat and beans, 6 ounce equivalents; and grains, 6 ounce equivalents.

Other Helpful Hints

Planning Meals

1. Choose one-dish meals or foods that efficiently use equipment. (A casserole is an example of a one-dish food where most of the food is cooked at one time.)
2. Fruit salads make an excellent substitution for desserts. Look for easy, low-fat recipes.
3. Limit your selection of foods that are mostly fat such as butter, margarine, mayonnaise, salad dressing, or fried foods.
4. Limit soft drinks, desserts, cakes, cookies, and salty snack chips.
5. Select leaner cuts of meat, and trim off excess fats. Cuts that say “round” or “loin” are the most lean.
6. Consider an occasional “meatless meal” and serve beans, peas, or nuts in place of your meat.
7. Remove skin from chicken and turkey. (Most of the fat is in the skin.)
8. Season foods with herbs and spices instead of high-sodium items such as salt, soy sauce, or steak sauce. Experiment to find the ones you and your family enjoy.

Make the Most of Meal Times

In addition to making your meals more healthy and varied, you can use your meals as an opportunity to sit down and share as a family. With our busy lifestyles and the variety of activities we have on any given day, it is sometimes difficult to find time to spend together. Setting aside meal times to be shared together assures you of more nutritious meals and also provides your family valuable time together. Here are a few tips on making the most of your meal times.

- **Plan ahead and make meal times a priority.** Remember, a family doesn’t always have to share the evening meal. Consider morning meals on days when there are conflicts that evening. Also consider sharing the noon meal. Weekends are good times to share breakfast or lunch. Planning ahead will save you time and give everyone the opportunity to participate.
- **Make meal times enjoyable.** It is said that good food and good company go well together. Try to avoid criticism or scolding during family meal times. Instead, try to make the meal inviting and enjoyable for each other. If meal times are positive, your family will look forward to sharing the meal together.
- **Share the responsibility.** Meals should be everyone’s responsibility. No one should have to shoulder the responsibility of meal time alone. Remember, in addition to choosing the menu and purchasing and preparing the food, you should also set the table properly. After the meal, it should be cleared, with the dishes cleaned and any leftovers properly stored. The entire family can share these responsibilities, from the oldest to the youngest. If each

family member helps with meal times, it makes it more enjoyable for everyone.

- **Practice good manners.** No matter who we are, at some point, we will find ourselves in a situation where people are watching our table etiquette. It is important to be prepared for these situations, and there is no better time or place to practice than daily in the home. Teach and encourage your children to practice proper table etiquette, from the moment they arrive at the table until the end of the meal. There is no substitute for good manners.
- **Avoid distractions.** It is important during family meal times not to allow distractions such as television and cell phones. These take the focus off of the family and prevent you from sharing as a family. Stick to making meal times your opportunity to share and grow as a family.
- **Find something to talk about.** It is just as important for your family meal times to be a time to socialize as it is for your meals to be nutritious. Instead of hurrying through your meals and ending the meal as quickly as possible, stop, relax, and think about the day you have had or the day you are going to have. Remember, this may be the only time you are all together as a family, so make the most of it.

Meal times are important times to refuel our bodies with a variety of healthy and nutritious foods. They also provide us with an opportunity to share and strengthen our relationships as a family. Proper planning can help you save time purchasing and preparing nutritious meals. Planning can help you save money and avoid buying unnecessary food items. Finally, planning gives your family the opportunity to make time for each other.

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