



September 2023 Newsletter

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Meal Planning for Busy Families

By Sheila Gains, Family & Consumer Science Specialist, Arapahoe County

Is meal planning something you would like to do before the family gets busy preparing for a variety of back-to-school tasks? While it takes some time and organizational skills to accomplish, it is worth the effort. A well-crafted meal plan can help you feel confident and ready for another school year. Additional benefits include saving time, money, and stress, all while improving the nutrition of the foods your family eats. If this sounds like something you would like to do, keep reading.



MEAL PLAN OF THE WEEK			
Foods or Ingredients I Already Have to Use This Week	Breakfast	Lunch	Dinner



Time Saver

Despite the upfront time and effort needed to plan a week of meals, you will ultimately save time by having what you need to prepare meals on hand. This helps avoid the time you would spend running to the store multiple times in a week. Meal planning also saves cooking and food preparation time. This is accomplished when you prepare enough ingredients for two meals at the same time. For example, chopping enough onions for the week at one time, or browning ground meat for two meals while the pan is still hot. This also saves cleanup time.

Furthermore, if you share the meal plan by posting it on the refrigerator, others can help with the meal preparation. Imagine a family member helping by peeling the carrots or washing the salad greens before you get home, or while you do something else.

In many circumstances, a quick meal at home can take less time than driving through a fast-food restaurant.

Budget Buster

Besides saving time, meal planning saves money. Going out to eat is almost always more expensive than preparing the same meal at home. In addition to the cost of the restaurant meal, don't forget about the cost of delivery, or driving to and from a restaurant and tips.



With a plan you can take advantage of advertised sales and coupons. Have you heard of intentional shopping? This is when instead of buying what looks good in the moment, you buy foods on your list that meet the needs of your diet, budget, and lifestyle.

Despite your best efforts, food waste is a reality that costs money. Therefore, it saves money to have a weekly meal plan for using leftovers. For example, you can freeze small bits of leftover foods throughout the week. Then plan to use them to create tasty soup, casserole, or pizza topping, later in the week.

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Stress and Anxiety Reducer

If you are like me, the reoccurring question of “What am I going to cook for dinner?” keeps distracting me from other daily tasks and enjoyment. Making a plan makes a big difference in my stress level. Having several days of meals planned quiets my mind, allowing me to accomplish more than if I were ruminating on the “What’s for dinner?” question every day.



Health Promoter

Undoubtedly, I can prepare a meal with more fiber and less saturated fat and salt, than a meal I purchase in the drive through. Research has shown that meals prepared at home tend to contain more fruits and vegetables, adding to the health advantage of home prepared meals. Additionally, I can serve a balanced meal of foods that meet my family’s health and dietary needs.

How to Make a Meal Plan

1. There are lots of tools out there to help you plan meals and create a corresponding shopping list, but all you really need is a pen and paper.
2. Think about your family’s weekly schedule.
3. Make a list of what foods you already have at home.
4. Decide on meals and gather recipes for what you want to make.
5. Make a shopping list.
6. Post the plan.



Let’s Talk

Get the whole family talking about what meals or dishes they would like to eat this week. Even if they only give you main dish ideas, it can kick-start the planning process. Post your meal plans in a place family members can see them, so they can help get parts of the meal ready.

Recipe for Health

Burrito Bowls – Some assembly required.

Serve any combination of these prepared foods. They can be passed around the table or served buffet style, on the counter. Everyone gets to pick and choose what goes into their bowl. Leftover ingredients can be frozen and repurposed for another meal, such as a tortilla-style soup, nachos, pizza toppings or an enchilada casserole.

- Cooked ground meat (beef, chicken, turkey, pork)
- Flour or corn tortillas (optional)
- Cooked rice or corn
- Canned refried or black beans
- Grated cheese
- Sour cream
- Salsa
- Shredded lettuce

Want More Information? Contact your local CSU Extension Office for information on upcoming “**Meal Planning with Confidence**” online trainings and free online planning tools. <https://extension.colostate.edu/field-offices/>