Healthy Connections: Family Meals in a Snap

K-STATE Research and Extension
Family and Consumer Sciences

FACT SHEET

2026 Annual Lesson Series



In today's fast-paced world, finding time to prepare and enjoy home-cooked meals can seem like a challenge. Busy schedules, work commitments, and after-school activities can leave guardians regularly scrambling to feed their families. However, cooking at home offers numerous benefits — it promotes better nutrition, saves money, reduces stress, and strengthens family bonds. With a little planning, practice, and strategy, preparing healthy meals at home can become both manageable and enjoyable.

What are the benefits of preparing meals at home?

Preparing and consuming family meals at home can be beneficial to improve the health of all family members, while reducing the amount of money families spend on food. Meals prepared at home have been found to have fewer calories, sugar and fat when compared to meals consumed outside of the home. Portion sizes are also easier to control at home, which can assist in preventing, controlling, or delaying the onset of chronic health conditions. In addition, a review of research analyzing the importance of family meals identified that eating meals at home together as a family can result in:

- Improved overall well-being in adolescents.
- Increased dietary intake of calcium, fiber, iron, zinc, folate, and vitamins A, B12, B6, C, and E in all family members.
- Increased intake of fruits and vegetables in all family members.
- Decreased rates of depression and violence in adolescents.
- Decreased risk of eating disorders in adolescents.
- Decreased risk of tobacco, alcohol, and marijuana use in adolescents.
- Increased positive emotions in women.

Small Steps to Meal Planning Success

Planning healthy family meals doesn't have to be overwhelming; taking small steps can lead to manageable changes that can improve the health and well-being of your entire family.

Spending 20 to 30 minutes creating a meal plan can save time and stress throughout the week. Creating a meal plan that works with your schedule, food availability, and food preferences will help you be successful. Slow cooker meals, healthy grab-and-go options (such as homemade freezer burritos), or planning a night for leftovers, can significantly reduce the amount of time you would spend cooking that night.

Stock Your Pantry/Cook Your Cupboard

Stocking your pantry may not seem like an important component in creating healthy mealtimes for your family but it can be a first step in doing just that. Having a

well-stocked pantry increases your likelihood of cooking because you already have the items you need on hand. You will probably find yourself spending less prep time in the kitchen if the items you need are already available. Stocking your pantry will help you save time and money in the long run.

So, what should you stock your pantry and refrigerator/freezer with? Here are a few suggestions:

- Dried herbs and spices: Salt, pepper, garlic powder, onion powder, chili powder, cinnamon, oregano, parsley, paprika, cumin, basil
- Fruits and vegetables: Frozen, fresh, canned (vegetables: no salt added or low sodium, and fruits: in 100% fruit juice or water)
- Protein: Canned salmon, tuna, chicken, canned or dried beans, eggs, fresh or frozen meats, nuts and nut butters, seeds
- Dairy: Yogurt, milk, cheese, unsalted butter
- Breads: Tortillas, English muffins, bagels, bread, crackers, pretzels (make half of your grains whole grains)
- Grains: Brown rice, whole wheat pasta, oats, quinoa, barley, popcorn kernels, corn flour (make half of your grains whole grains)
- Basics: Olive oil, vinegars, flour, baking soda, baking powder, cocoa powder, sugar
- Condiments: Ketchup, mustard, Dijon mustard, mayonnaise, jelly/jam, honey, hot sauce, soy sauce
- Other goods: Broth or stock (low sodium), pasta sauce, tomato sauce, pickles, salsa, salad dressings, unsweetened applesauce

Money Saving Tips

Shopping with a plan will save you time and money at the grocery store. Create your meal plan based on your store's weekly sales and app/in-store coupons. When deciding which meals you will make for the week, take into account what meals will be eaten at home and if you're expecting company. This will reduce any last-minute trips to the store, which may create added stress, shopping time, and expense.

Decide which recipes you will want to use. Choose nutritious recipes your family will enjoy and strive to try a new fruit or vegetable each week. Remember to schedule and plan for leftovers. Next, create your grocery list according to the layout of the store as this will save time and keep you from wandering the aisles purchasing non-essentials. When you get to the store, remember these money-saving tips:

- Look for store brand or generic items. These are often cheaper and taste similar to name brands.
- Check out all levels of the shelves. Oftentimes, the more expensive items are at eye level.
- Consider purchasing in bulk, especially meat, if you can use it for another meal.
- Look for in-season produce.

Time Saving Tips

- *Practice, Practice, Practice!* The more you practice in the kitchen and continue to sharpen your cooking skills, the quicker and easier meal prep will become. Remember to have fun in the kitchen and don't stress if things don't go perfectly. Keep at it!
- *Prepare staple items once a week.* Consider cooking a large batch of protein such as chicken, beef, or fish or other staples like rice and beans. Preparing the main meal ingredients ahead of time to utilize throughout the week will save you time each night.
- *Plan for and utilize leftovers.* Planning to cook ahead for the next day or two will not add much time to your meal prep but will save plenty of time for your future self. Double a recipe and use the extra meal for tomorrow night or tomorrow's lunch. Be sure to plan ahead and move your meals from the freezer to the refrigerator to allow time to thaw (allow at least 24 to 48 hours).
- *Pre-cut fruits and vegetables.* Chopping vegetables and fruit ahead of time and safely storing in the refrigerator and freezer to utilize throughout your week can drastically reduce the time spent prepping your meal. For example, if you chop onions and bell peppers ahead of time, you can cook a protein of choice in a skillet and throw in the onions and peppers for quick and delicious fajitas. Save even more time by prepping that protein at the beginning of the week!
- *One pot and sheet pan meals*. An excellent way to reduce time and dishes is to utilize sheet pan meals and one pot meals. These will take a bit of coordination to ensure all foods in the final product are done at the same time, but the result is worth the effort.



- *Use cost-friendly kitchen appliances.* Many families use kitchen appliances such as slow cookers, rice cookers, or electric pressure cookers to save time in the kitchen. These appliances are excellent resources if they are used safely. Follow the manufacturer's instructions and use them for healthy recipes.
- *Wash dishes as you go.* No one likes to have a sink full of dishes staring at them when their meal is over. Washing a few dishes while you cook will help you spend more time with your family in the evenings.

Food Safety Basics

Utilizing a slow cooker is a convenient way to have meals prepared when your family is ready to eat. Slow cookers cook at a lower temperature, typically 170° to 280°F over an extended period. This allows busy families to start a meal in the morning and arrive home to a cooked meal. To ensure food safety, the USDA recommends that meat and poultry always be thawed prior to placing them in a slow cooker. Adding frozen meat to a slow cooker can extend how long the food takes to reach a safe internal temperature, which could result in foodborne illness.

Safe thawing of frozen foods is essential to avoid bacteria growth. Thawing foods can safely be done in three ways: in a refrigerator, in cold water, or in a microwave. If using the cold-water method or microwave, food should be cooked immediately after thawing. Never thaw food on the kitchen counter, in hot water, or outdoors because these methods can make food unsafe. Allow time to thaw foods for meals safely. If baking freezer meals, allow approximately one and a half times the usual cooking time if the meal is cooked from a frozen state. Always use a food thermometer to ensure your meal is thoroughly cooked.

Leftovers should be reheated to an internal temperature of 165°F. Leftovers should be refrigerated or frozen within 2 hours. If the air temperature is above 90°F, such as at an outdoor picnic, food should be refrigerated within 1 hour. Leftovers stored in the freezer will be of the best quality if used within 3 to 4 months. Consider freezing leftovers in portion sizes appropriate for future meals. Use freezer-safe containers to ensure that the flavor, color, and nutrient value of your food is maintained. Before freezing, ensure as much air has been removed from the freezer bag or container as possible.

Tips for Meal Safety and Success

- Always wash your hands with soap and water for 20 seconds and clean and sanitize surfaces before and after cooking.
- Wash hands thoroughly before starting to cook and after handling raw meats, poultry, seafood, and eggs.
- Safely thaw meat and poultry prior to adding it to a slow cooker.
- Use a cutting board for fresh produce and a separate cutting board for raw meats, poultry, and seafood to reduce the risk of cross-contamination.
- Save money by purchasing meats that are on sale. The low and slow cooking method in a slow cooker can make tough cuts more tender.
- Consume leftovers stored in the refrigerator within 3 to 4 days.
- Leftovers should be refrigerated or frozen within 2 hours.

When planning and preparing recipes, consider how the product could be reused in other meals during the week. Doubling this Salsa Verde Chicken recipe could result in shredded chicken to make tacos, burritos, salad, soup, or nachos. Add low-sodium canned black beans and no-sodium canned corn for variety.

Salsa Verde Chicken

Ingredients

- 1½ pounds boneless, skinless chicken thighs or breasts
- ½ teaspoon chili powder
- ½ teaspoon cumin
- 1 jar (12-16 ounces) salsa verde
- ½ cup water

Instructions

1. Wash hands with soap and water for 20 seconds.
2. Spray slow cooker with non-stick cooking spray. Put chicken in the bottom of slow cooker.
3. Sprinkle chicken with chili powder and cumin.
4. Pour salsa over chicken.
5. Pour water in salsa jar, put on lid, shake it up, and pour into the slow cooker.
6. Cook on high for 4 to 5 hours or low for 6 to 8 hours.
7. Put chicken on a plate. Shred with a fork.
8. Spoon extra sauce from the slow cooker over the top of the shredded chicken.

Nutrition Facts

6 servings per recipe
Serving Size: 1/2 cup

Amount Per Serving
Calories 160

	% Daily Value*
Total Fat 4g	**5%**
Saturated Fat 0.5g	**3%**
Trans Fat 0g	
Cholesterol 85mg	**28%**
Sodium 470mg	**20%**
Total Carbohydrates 4g	**1%**
Dietary Fiber 0g	**0%**
Total Sugars 4g	
Includes 0g Added Sugars	**0%**
Protein 26g	
Vitamin D 0mcg	**0%**
Calcium 8mg	**0%**
Iron 1mg	**6%**
Potassium 498mg	**10%**

* The % Daily Value (DV) tells you how much a nutrient in a serving of food contributes to a daily diet. 2,000 calories a day is used for general nutrition advice.

NA* - We are currently in the process of integrating the new FDA Nutrition Standards. Added Sugar information is not currently available for the recipe. We will be updating the information shortly.

Tips: Do not add frozen meat to a crock pot. Thaw the meat for 24 to 48 hours in the refrigerator before cooking. Always wash your hands after handling raw chicken.

Additional Recipe Resources

https://food.unl.edu/recipe/chicken-and-veggies-sheet-pan-meal/

https://spendsmart.extension.iastate.edu/recipes/

https://food.unl.edu/taxonomy/term/25/

https://extension.wvu.edu/food-health/recipes/2021/11

https://www.ndsu.edu/agriculture/extension/extension-topics/food-and-nutrition/recipes

Resources:

Glanz K, Metcalfe JJ, Folta SC, Brown A, Fiese B. Diet and Health Benefits Associated with In-Home Eating and Sharing Meals at Home: A Systematic Review. Int J Environ Res Public Health. 2021 Feb 7;18(4):1577. doi: 10.3390/ijerph18041577. PMID: 33562357; PMCID: PMC7915304.

Tiwari A, Aggarwal A, Tang W, Drewnowski A. Cooking at Home: A Strategy to Comply With U.S. Dietary Guidelines at No Extra Cost. Am J Prev Med. 2017 May;52(5):616-624. doi: 10.1016/j.amepre.2017.01.017. Epub 2017 Feb 28. PMID: 28256283; PMCID: PMC5401643.

Bahtiraj, K., Garden-Robinson, J.(2024, April 16). Cooking 101 (week 4) quick and easy menus, recipes and tips for singles and couples: Grocery Shopping Made Easy. NDSU Agriculture. ndsu.edu/agriculture/extension/publications/cooking-101-week-4-quick-and-easy-menus-recipes-and-tips-singles-and-couples

Slow Cookers and Food Safety | Food Safety and Inspection Service. (n.d.). fsis.usda.gov/food-safety/safe-food-handling-and-preparation/food-safety-basics/slow-cookers-and-food-safety

Cutting Boards, Food Safety and Inspection Service, (n.d.). fsis.usda.gov/food-safety/safe-food-handling-and-preparation/food-safety-basics/cutting-boards

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