Quick Meals

Quick meals are a necessity, especially when time is limited by working outside the home, participating in many community activities, or staying busy with small children or elderly parents. Throwing together a meal in minutes is easy if you have done some advance preparation.

Forty-five years ago a typical family meal took 2½ hours to prepare. Today it takes only 45 minutes or less to have a meal on the table, yet 60% of American women would like to shorten that time to 15 minutes or less!

Planning is Key

Healthy foods can be part of anyone’s schedule and cooking style. However, tasty, nutritious meals don’t just happen; they must be planned.

As you plan your menus and shopping list, think about your schedule. Ask yourself, “How much time will I have for food preparation this week? Will this be a busy week for fixing quick meals, or will I have extra time to cook and freeze some foods ahead for a busier week?”

With careful planning you will know the answer to the question, “What’s for dinner tonight?” And, it can be something nutritious. Know your family’s schedule and include foods that can be prepared in the time available. Use your meal plan to make out your grocery list.

Preparing Quick Meals

Follow these tips to save time and energy while serving healthful foods to your family.

Get Organized to Cut Preparation Time: Arrange your kitchen for easy use. Keep counter tops uncluttered and the pantry organized. Group all equipment and utensils near the area where they are most often used. Put your most-used utensils in a convenient drawer.

Invest in some appliances (e.g. microwave oven, toaster oven, pressure saucepan and food processor) that can reduce your preparation time or cook foods in less time.

Prepare Foods According to Their Cooking Times: Before starting a meal, think about the work to be done and the cooking time for each dish. Try to time foods to finish cooking just at mealtime. Usually it is best to start with the food with the longest cooking time, and then prepare the others while it cooks. However, if all the foods cook in the same amount of time, then start with the one that will hold up best.

Stock up on Quick-to-Fix Foods: Put nutritious meals together in a hurry by keeping a well-stocked pantry, refrigerator and freezer. “Speed-scratch” meals are easy to prepare with foods such as: lean deli meats; fully cooked chicken and beef strips; precut stir-fry vegetables; prewashed salad greens or spinach; sliced fruits and vegetables; salsa; milk; yogurt; grated cheese; canned fruits; canned beans; frozen and canned vegetables; bread; pasta and rice.

Think about the foods your family likes, and then use this list as a guide to stock up on the basics. For a more detailed list, refer to HGIC 4225, Stocking the Home Pantry for Quick Meals.

Pantry:
- spaghetti, macaroni and other pasta
- packaged biscuit baking mix
- ready-to-heat sauces and reduced fat, reduced sodium soups
• rice, barley, lentils and split peas
• potatoes and onions
• canned fruits, vegetables, beans, tuna, milk
• canned and bottled fruit and vegetable juices
• salsa, seasoning and sauce mixes and other condiments
• cooking oil and non-stick spray

Refrigerator & Freezer:
• fresh and frozen vegetables, baby carrots and prewashed salad greens
• fresh and frozen fruit and fruit juices
• frozen chopped onion and green pepper
• tortillas, pita bread, pizza crust, bagels, ready-to-bake rolls, whole grain bread, English muffins
• cheese (grated, sliced), yogurt, cottage cheese, milk, eggs, margarine
• cooked sliced meat or poultry, fish and ground meats
• skinless, boneless chicken or turkey breasts
• shaped and seasoned hamburger patties
• cooked pasta, rice, bulgur and barley

When Really Rushed: Think convenience.
According to the Food Marketing Institute, 42% of meals eaten at home are prepared somewhere else, including 25% from restaurant take-out.

Take advantage of the variety of healthful and convenient foods available. Buy a prepared meal or entree that only needs to be heated or assembled on your plate, and serve it with a side dish.

Pick up a roast chicken or pizza on the way home. Toss a salad, cut up some fruit, pour some milk and dinner is served! Or, buy a heat-and-eat pot roast from the meat case at the grocery store, and serve it with a microwave-baked potato and canned green beans.

Prepare Your Own Ingredients Ahead of Time:
Do prepning beforehand so that ingredients are ready to be added when you start meal preparation.
• Wash and cut up vegetables, fruits and meats yourself. When your time is very limited, choose precut foods, although they are generally more expensive.
• Cook lean ground meat and refrigerate or freeze it for spaghetti sauce and tacos.
• Cook noodles for pasta salad.
• Hard cook eggs, remove the shells, and refrigerate them in a covered container for up to three or four days.
• Make and freeze soup stock in ice cube trays.
• Put vegetable and meat pieces on skewers for kabobs the night before and refrigerate.

Choose Foods With Short Cooking Times: Meats that cook faster include items such as ground meat, the tender cuts, steaks, chops and fish. Canned vegetables and fruits and quick breads also can be prepared quickly. Vegetables cut in small pieces for stir-fry will cook very quickly and retain nutrients well. However, vegetables and meat for stewing in water will lose water-soluble vitamins and minerals if cut into small pieces with more surface exposed.

Use Quick Cooking Methods: For faster cooking, slice meat and poultry thinly. Instead of baking or roasting, choose a cooking method like broiling, stir-frying or microwaving.

Pull out the old favorite crock pot or slow cooker. You can make a delicious roast, stew or soup without having to constantly watch the food. No matter what time you get home, the food will be ready and hot! To ensure food safety, follow proper cooking methods when using your crock pot.

Do “Batch Cooking”: Make extra food on purpose. Cook a double or triple batch when you have time, such as in the evenings or on weekends. Simmer enough pasta to serve with meat sauce now, and refrigerate the rest to use in a tuna salad tomorrow. Cook dried beans, rice, macaroni, noodles and potatoes to use in many different ways (e.g. salads, casseroles and side dishes).

Stock your freezer with main dishes that are ready to reheat. Make a large pot of chili for tonight’s dinner, and freeze some in family-size portions for quick thawing later in the week. Cook soups, stews and casseroles to freeze for later use.

Cook One-Dish Meals: A variety of nutritious items from the different food groups in MyPyramid can be packed into a one-dish meal or a skillet meal. Examples include: ham and spinach quiche; chef’s salad; tuna casserole; chicken stir-fry with noodles,
tofu and vegetables; chicken fajitas in a soft taco; salmon or vegetable salad stuffed into a pita pocket. Limit the number of mixed dishes served at one meal. Serve sliced tomatoes rather than a tossed salad with a main dish casserole.

Cook a one-dish meal in the slow cooker, or crock pot, so that dinner is ready when you get home from work. If you’d prefer a casserole, most recipes can be prepared one day, refrigerated and baked the next day. Many baking dishes and skillets are attractive enough to go directly from the stove to the table. Using cookware in which the foods can be cooked, served and stored saves clean up time, also.

Create Your Own Casserole or One-Dish Meal: It is easy to make a casserole or one-dish meal with items that you have on hand. Choose one or more ingredient(s) from each of the following categories:

- 1½ to 2 cups cooked or canned meat, chicken, fish, eggs, dried beans, peas
- 1½ cups vegetables (e.g. tomatoes, green beans, potatoes, broccoli, peas, cabbage)
- 1 to 1½ cups cubed bread, cooked rice or pasta
- 1 to 1½ cups liquid ingredients (e.g. cream soup, tomato soup or sauce, cheese sauce, white sauce, evaporated milk or shredded cheese plus milk)
- other optional ingredients for flavor (e.g. onion, spices, herbs)

Mix ingredients thoroughly and cook in the oven or on the stove top. If you cook in the oven, place the ingredients in a covered casserole dish and add optional toppings, such as bread crumbs, cracker crumbs or Parmesan cheese. Bake at 350 °F for 45 minutes. Uncover the last 15 minutes to brown the topping. Serve hot.

If you cook this one-dish meal on the stove top, place the ingredients in a large skillet. Simmer until bubbly. An optional topping of Parmesan cheese or croutons can be added to each serving. Serve hot.

Use Foods That Cook for the Same Time & at the Same Temperature: This allows you to cook them together, conserving energy and making the most efficient use of your time. Oven temperatures are not critical for some foods (e.g. casseroles, baked potatoes and roasts) and can be adjusted upwards or downwards by as much as 25 °F.

Use “Planned Overs”: You can save time and money by incorporating leftovers into your menus. Cook extra food as “planned-overs” for later use. Make enough rice to use later in stir-frys, pilafs, rice pudding, soups or salads. Toss cold vegetables in a salad or casserole, or add them to sandwiches. Use leftover chicken in soups, salads, quesadillas, pasta dishes or sandwiches.

Many leftover foods improve in flavor on standing. For example, soups and stews cooked one day (and refrigerated quickly) may taste better when reheated the next day.

Plan Assemble-Your-Own Menus: Have ingredients on hand for family members to make their own meals, such as deli sandwiches. Or, let them make their own mini-pizzas by topping English muffin halves with tomato sauce, chopped broccoli and shredded cheese. Heat mini-pizzas in a toaster oven or broiler.

For More Information
To learn the steps to meal planning, refer to [HGIC 4200, Planning Meals for a Family](https://www.iastate.edu/extension/hgic). It also contains tips on adding variety and plate appeal to meals.

Use MyPyramid, USDA’s latest food guide pyramid, for planning healthy meals. Your menus should provide foods from its five food groups: meat and beans; milk; fruits; vegetables and breads. To plan the amounts of foods needed from each food group, refer to [HGIC 4010, MyPyramid](https://www.iastate.edu/extension/hgic) or go to [www.mypyramid.gov](http://www.mypyramid.gov).

Sources:
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