Stocking the Home Pantry for Quick Meals

The two keys to making quick, healthy meals and snacks are to keep a well-stocked kitchen and to spend a few minutes planning meals every week.

Buy foods you can make and serve in a hurry. Look for items that are low-sodium (salt), fat-free or low-fat, and choose canned fruit packed in water or juice. Stock your pantry with healthy snack items, such as dried fruits, whole grain crackers and nuts. Serve goodies only on special occasions. Don’t tempt your family with chips, cookies, candy, soft drinks and other junk foods.

Here is a basic list of versatile staple foods to stock in your pantry, refrigerator and freezer. The list can be personalized based on the foods your family likes and uses often.

**Pantry**

- whole grain crackers
- plain and seasoned rice, preferably brown
- spaghetti, macaroni and other pasta, preferably whole-wheat
- potatoes and dehydrated potato dishes
- whole grain cereals (with less than 3 grams of fat per serving and at least 3 grams, preferably 5 or more, of fiber per serving)
- oatmeal (preferably quick cooking, because instant contains more sodium)
- dried beans, peas and lentils
- evaporated skimmed milk
- canned tomatoes, tomato sauce and paste
- canned chicken, tuna and salmon packed in water
- canned beans, peas, carrots, beets and other vegetables, preferably low-sodium (salt) or no salt added
- peaches, pears and other fruits canned in juice or light syrup
- canned, bottled and boxed 100% fruit and vegetable juices
- raisins and other dried fruits
- nuts
- peanut butter
- canned low-sodium chicken or beef broth
- canned low-sodium soups
- spaghetti sauce, barbecue sauce, and other ready-to-heat sauces
- onions
- cornstarch
- honey
- salt and pepper
- herbs and spices (at least three or four)
- canned chilies and peppers
- olive oil and vegetable oil
- vinegar
- white and whole wheat flour
- packaged quick bread mixes (e.g. biscuits, cornbread, pancakes and pizza)

**Refrigerator**

- cooked sliced meat or poultry, fish and ground meats
- prewashed salad greens
- fresh vegetables
- fresh fruits and fruit juices
- milk (fat-free or low-fat)
- hard cheeses, sliced and grated (e.g. Swiss and cheddar)
- plain yogurt
- low-fat cottage cheese
- low-fat or nonfat salad dressings
- margarine, preferably soft
- mustard and catsup
- salsa
- eggs or egg substitutes
• tortillas, pita bread, bagels, English muffins, pizza crust, ready-to-bake rolls, whole grain bread

Freezer

• lean ground meats
• hamburger patties, shaped and seasoned
• skinless, boneless poultry or meat, preferably frozen individually
• cooked strips of meat or poultry
• fish fillets
• chopped green peppers and onions
• frozen vegetables
• frozen fruits and fruit juices
• ready-to-bake casseroles
• microwave dinners
• part-skim mozzarella cheese (for pizza and casseroles)
• frozen yogurt
• loaves of whole-wheat bread, bagels and French bread

Vegetables & Fruits: Canned, Frozen or Fresh?

Focus on consuming more vegetables and fruits, whether they’re fresh, frozen or canned. Research published in 2007 in the *Journal of the Science of Food and Agriculture* showed that canned and frozen products often contain as many or more nutrients than fresh produce from the grocery store. Studies by the University of Massachusetts show that recipes prepared with canned ingredients are as nutritious as recipes using fresh or frozen ones.

Canned fish contain more calcium than the same amount of freshly cooked fish. However, the amount of fiber in canned vegetables and fruits is often less than the amount in fresh or frozen foods.

If you buy fresh vegetables and fruits, plan on using them within a week, because they lose nutrients during storage and cooking. According to FDA’s Center for Food Safety and Nutrition, fresh fruits and vegetables could lose almost half of their vitamins within a few days if not chilled or preserved properly. Exact losses vary for specific nutrients, foods and conditions.

Quick Meal Tips

• Let the first family member home from work start the meal. As an incentive to cook, agree that the cook doesn’t have to clean up!
• Clean out the refrigerator before going to shop. This helps you create a more accurate grocery list and makes it quicker to put away the groceries.
• Stock a variety of seasonings and condiments, because they can transform healthy food into a delicious meal.
• Buy prepackaged greens, vegetables or fruits for quick salads. Plan to use them within a day or two.
• Make a main dish salad by adding cooked meat or poultry to prepackaged salad greens.
• For an easy main dish, brown chicken breasts in a small amount of oil. Simmer until done in equal parts of apple juice and low-sodium broth seasoned with a teaspoon of rosemary and a teaspoon of thyme.
• Marinate meat in low-fat Italian salad dressing. Throw away leftover marinade, because it is unsafe to reuse it.
• Cover boneless chicken breasts or strips in low-fat Italian salad dressing/marinade and cook in the microwave. For a delicious side dish, pour some of the hot marinade over rice.
• Make a quick side dish of Spanish rice by stirring salsa into prepared rice.
• Fill pita pockets with any sandwich filling or use them as bases for small pizzas.
• Sprinkle vegetables with balsamic vinegar or rice vinegar for added zip.
• Make a quick soup base with vegetable juice.
• Keep peeled onions in the refrigerator so they are handy when you need them. Use within a few days.
• In freezer bags, package meal-size portions of meat and poultry for grilling. Add marinade, which will add flavor as the meat thaws.
For More Information
Refer to HGIC 4200, Planning Meals for a Family to learn the steps to meal planning and how to add variety and plate appeal to meals. For additional tips on preparing meals in minutes, go to HGIC 4240, Quick Meals.

Sources:
3. Kunkel, M. Elizabeth. Quick and Easy Dinners. Nourishing News (November 2002), Clemson University Department of Food Science and Human Nutrition and EFNEP.

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