

Fix It Fast; Fix It Healthy

Margaret Miltenberger, WVU Extension Agent, Mineral County

Have a Plan!

Plan ahead to avoid the question, “What’s for dinner tonight?” and increase the likelihood that meals are quick and nutritious. There’s no magic formula. Choose what works best for you – a few days or a week at a time. The key is planning meals that work with your schedule!

- Plan menus to guide your shopping and preparation.
- Organize your shopping list to save time in the market.
- Study your kitchen and organize it to maximize efficiency.
- “Cook once; eat twice” as often as possible – use food later in the week or create quick freezer dinners.
- Create five survival meals and keep the ingredients on hand.
- Choose short recipes and fewer courses.
- Clear out unused clutter, utensils, and pans.



Shop Smart

Create a master list to guide shopping and increase efficiency. Select categories, such as meats, dairy products, produce, canned goods, cereals, frozen foods, nonfood items, and baked goods.

Group items. Grouping foods by category will eliminate backtracking at the market. The master list could reflect the store layout. If you don’t need something in a category, skip that aisle.

Shop “super” markets. Shop markets you’re familiar with so you don’t waste time looking for items. Select markets with efficient layouts.

Avoid “rush hour.” Shop when aisles aren’t crowded and checkout lines are short.

Use prepared ingredients. When balancing time and money, buy some prepared ingredients. Consider prewashed fresh spinach for a salad, prepared chicken breast for stir-fry, or preshredded cheese for pasta.

Quicker Meal Preparation

The days of seven-course meals are long gone. To make a fast track to the dinner table, take advantage of main dish meals, handy kitchen tools, and healthy convenience foods.

- Keep a well-stocked pantry and refrigerator.
- Do some preparation the night before. Spend most of your time preparing one entree per meal.
- Prewash and prepare vegetables for quick snacks or additions to dishes.
- Multitask while cooking.
- Choose wide-diameter saucepans to speed heating.
- Use work- and time-saving ingredients and gadgets.
- Bake or chill the dessert while you’re eating.
- Combine cooking time and family time.
- To save cleanup, mix, cook, and serve in the same dish.

Healthy Meals

Start with Good Choices

Enjoy a rainbow of colors. Take advantage of the array of colorful fresh fruits and vegetables to get your 5-A-Day! Look for weekly specials at local farmers’ markets or in the produce aisle. Fruits and veggies provide essential vitamins, minerals, and phytochemicals that promote health and help prevent diseases.

Keep milk on the menu. What could be easier than pouring a glass? Plan for 3-A-Day. Having milk, yogurt, and cheeses is a deliciously easy way for everyone to meet daily calcium needs. Calcium-fortified juices don’t contain milk’s bone-building package of vitamin D and protein.

Go for the whole grains. Whole grains provide more fiber, vitamins, and minerals than their refined cousins. From breads to pastas, the choices are endless. Look for grains such as whole-wheat flour, graham flour, oatmeal, brown rice, whole oats, or barley listed as the first ingredient on the label.

Look for 100 percent. When buying juices, look for 100 percent on the label. Limit juice intake to no more than 4 to 6 ounces for 1- to 6-year-olds and 8 to 12 ounces for 7- to 18-year-olds and adults. Remember that fresh fruits provide fiber and nutrients.

Eliminate the competition. Don't buy high-fat, high-sugar, or high-salt snack foods or they may crowd out more healthy options. Keep precut, washed vegetables and fresh fruit visible and easy to grab.

Remember breakfast. The most important meal of the day can be the quickest. Look for cereals that list whole grain or bran as the first ingredient and contain at least 2 grams of dietary fiber per serving. The choices are endless, although whole-grain cereals top the list as the best choice for weight control and improving health. The microwave makes hot cereals like oatmeal very fast.

Make good nutrition convenient. Pack the kitchen with nutritious foods that are ready to eat – fruits, vegetables, milk, and whole-grain snacks – instead of high-fat, high-sugar snacks.

FAST and Healthy Meal Ideas

Main-dish soups – Soups make delicious meals and can serve up a variety of vegetables, whole grains, and legumes. Soups can be made ahead and reheated quickly; they freeze well in batches or individual servings.

Main-dish salads – Main-dish salads can be nutritious and light. Use any combination of vegetables, fruits, pasta, cheese, meat, or nuts. Toss with your favorite dressing. Example: Start with a bag of prepared lettuce; add apples, crumbled bleu cheese, cucumbers, walnuts, light raspberry vinaigrette dressing, and a slice of whole grain bread.

Creative stir-fry – Stir-fry endless options of vegetables and meats. Simply serve over rice or pasta for a complete meal.

Flexible chicken – Whether you're grilling, stewing, or baking chicken, prepare extra and dice for chicken salads, chicken casseroles, etc. Use later in the week or freeze.

Precook ground beef – Cook ground beef or turkey with basic seasonings, drain, rinse, and freeze. After thawing, rinse off more fat with warm water. Add to many dishes, pasta sauce, casseroles, stews, etc.

Marinate meat before freezing – Portion beef, chicken, or pork in resealable bags. Add your favorite marinade and refrigerate overnight before freezing. This will save time after thawing!

Meal in a potato – Potatoes are the ultimate convenience food . . . and they're nutritious. Pierce with a fork before baking in the microwave. Top baked potatoes with chili, vegetables, cooked meats, or low-fat dairy products. Top sweet potatoes with cinnamon and fruit.

Instant brown rice – This nutritious side dish cooks quickly and has a tasty nutty flavor.

Pasta-bilities – Choose from a variety of shapes and sizes. Top with quick herb, white, or red sauce. Toss with grilled or stir-fried veggies. Use low-fat cheeses instead of meat.

Bread machine magic – A bread machine is a wonderful way to get a variety of whole grains. Save money and time by creating your own mixes. Label with the amount of liquid ingredients and yeast you need to add later.

Quick and Light Dessert Ideas

- Oatmeal raisin cookie bars save baking time.
- Just add water to angel food cake mix, whip, and bake. Top with fresh fruit.
- Sugar-free puddings and light whipped topping can be the basis for a variety of simple, delicious desserts.
- Fruit crisp made with oatmeal, less butter, and less sugar.
- Light frozen yogurt or iced milk topped with fruit makes a cool summer dessert.
- Experiment with parfaits – layer lemon yogurt or pudding, peaches, and ginger snap crumbs.

Action!

Select the tips that work with your lifestyle. Incorporate them into your routine and you will see a time-saving difference.

Resources

Consider subscribing to a magazine featuring quick meals or purchasing a good healthy/quick-meals recipe book. See Tufts University Web site's cookbook ratings. For meal planning tools – calendars, shopping lists, and pantry checklists – go to www.mealsmatter.org Web site.

2004: 10M

Programs and activities offered by the West Virginia University Extension Service are available to all persons without regard to race, color, sex, disability, religion, age, veteran status, political beliefs, sexual orientation, national origin, and marital or family status. Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Director, Cooperative Extension Service, West Virginia University.

ES03-123