

How to make your weekly meal prep easy

By Julia Haskins

If you've ever seen pictures online of people showing off their weekly meal preparation skills, you may think that it involves countless hours of grocery shopping, chopping, marinating and organizing kitchen supplies. The truth is that when done right, meal prep is a snap. And it may be healthier and less expensive than eating out.

We're all busy, whether it's because of work, family or our social lives. After a long day, it's tempting to just spend money on fast food. But if you have a nutritious meal ready to go, you don't have to rely on the drive-through for dinner. Your time and money are valuable. So why not try to save a little of both and eat healthier too? Here's how you can get started with simple, healthy meal prep that will get you through the work week.

Focus on what you want to eat

Before you buy a ton of storage containers or a fancy knife set, slow down and ask yourself a simple question: What do you like to eat? If you're cooking for a roommate, spouse or kids, ask them what their favorite meals are and plan your shopping list around those preferences. Opt for easy recipes that can go from your oven to table without too many steps or that can be tossed in a slow cooker.

Once you know what you want to eat, you can think about how much you'll need for the week. Sometimes figuring out how much food to buy is a matter of trial and error, but it's no reason to get discouraged.

"Getting a feel for what is a fair amount that you will actually eat...does take some practice," says Kristen Gradney, MHA, RDN, LDN, national media spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics.

She says that when starting out, people tend to buy more food than they need, assuming they will need to fill containers with huge amounts of produce. If you buy in bulk, make sure it's food you actually want and will eat



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before it spoils. After your first few meals, you can adjust your shopping as necessary.

Buy a variety of produce

To ensure that you're going to eat different combinations of the food that you buy on your shopping trip, be sure to include a variety of produce, Gradney recommends. She recognizes that it's easy to grow tired of eating the same kinds of foods. So instead of buying an entire head of lettuce when you know you won't use all of it, why not buy several kinds of produce instead? You can buy a few carrots, cucumbers and tomatoes, which make for more interesting and appetizing meals than just one ingredient over and over again.

While it's often cheaper to buy full produce, buying pre-packaged fruits and vegetables can help you get a sense of what counts as an appropriate serving size and also cut down on prep time in the kitchen. There's no right or wrong option. Just choose what works best for your wallet and schedule.

When you're selecting food for your weekly meal prep, it's good to have several go-to recipes on hand that use many of the same ingredients in different ways. But you don't

have to eat a salad or pasta every day.

Keep your meals interesting by choosing recipes that differ enough each day to make you excited for meal time. Gradney does this by using ingredients that work for several meals but mixes it up with different flavors and cuisines.

For example, she can go to her pre-chopped vegetables, such as onions, peppers or tomatoes, to wrap in tortillas for enchiladas one meal and use the same vegetables in spaghetti the next. Using different proteins, such as chicken, fish or tofu, also makes meals more interesting throughout the week.

If you have leftovers, you can freeze them or make them into something completely new. Meat used for a pasta dish can be easily added to a stir-fry or casserole. Extra beans, grains or noodles can go in a soup or stew with little extra effort on your part.

Keep a well-stocked pantry

You'll probably need to buy some fresh proteins and produce each week, but don't forget about what you already have stocked in your pantry. A well-kept pantry is key to good meal prep, allowing you to quickly grab items that work well in different dishes.

Keep plenty of canned goods on hand, such as beans, olives or tuna. Dried noodles, rice and condensed soup can all be used as bases for meals.

Knowing that you have a variety of nonperishable items on hand will help you cut down on stress at mealtime.

It's helpful to pick one day each week to do your shopping and one to do your actual meal prep, Gradney says. Many people like to use the weekend for their meal prep time, but you can shop and prepare meals whenever works best for you.

Meal prepping is also a great opportunity to get the whole family involved in getting food ready, she notes. Even chopping or washing is family time, made more special by the fact that all your work is going toward something you'll enjoy together.

