

Weekly Meal Planning for Reluctant Cooks

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The number of reluctant cooks is increasing astronomically. The main cause of this loss of enthusiasm for cooking is the economic pressures that people are dealing with these days. A good number of people are working 50+ hour/week jobs. Many families with children cannot afford to have a full-time homemaker, or even a half-time homemaker. The majority of people these days juggle meal planning and cooking with a very busy work-week of one kind or another. However, eating good tasting, nutritious meals is very important--all the more so if your life routine is grueling. Good food energizes your body and your spirit. Your body can tell the difference between a fresh, well-rounded, home-cooked dinner, and a fast-food sandwich, or a bowl of canned soup. Fresh, healthy balanced meals contain valuable nutrients that will improve your energy level and mental alertness, and decrease the number of days per year you get sick. Cooking delicious, nutritious food for yourself or your family is also an act of love and caring, and nurtures you on a psychological level. Given the many physical and psychological benefits of eating healthy meals, I firmly believe that people need to somehow restructure their lives to fit in regular meal planning and cooking. Here are some ideas about how to do that:

Tip #1: Create Some Time/Energy for Meal Planning and Cooking

Your first response is probably I have no time for cooking. The usual reason I hear is that people are working too many hours to find time for cooking. Though these are rough economic times, you do have more personal control over how much you work. Unless you are genuinely poor, you can get off the fifty-hour work week treadmill by examining your spending habits in all areas of your life to see where you can reduce your expenses. Consider getting a room-mate, moving to a smaller house or more affordable neighborhood, taking cheaper vacations, choosing less expensive recreational habits, etc, etc, etc. If you simplify your lifestyle, you can work less, and thereby make time for the important task of cooking physically and spiritually nourishing meals. You can allow yourself to truly engage with and enjoy the experience of cooking. Chopping vegetables, baking muffins, making homemade soup, making your own spaghetti sauce--these are all tasks that nourish the spirit as well as the body.

Tip #2: Do Menu Planning and Shopping on the Weekend

I worked at a food co-op for ten years. I was always amazed to see people wandering around the store after work mumbling to themselves "What can I cook for dinner tonight?" That is NOT something you decide at 5:30 after work!!! It is no fun to cook when you are hungry and pressed for time. All the stuff you need for Monday - Friday dinners should be in your refrigerator by Sunday night! Plan your menus, make a complete list of all the ingredients you will need, and do a major shopping trip on Saturday or Sunday. Post the week's menu on the refrigerator. All this organization will pay off later in the week when you're so frazzled you can barely recite the ingredients of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich!

Tip #3: Prep or Partially Cook Your Dinners the Night Before:

This is perhaps the most important. There are lots of meals that are difficult to make after work. But, if you do part of the cooking the night before you can finish the meals the following day in a half hour. While you are reading the paper, watching TV, doing laundry, talking on the phone, or doing homework with the kids, you can be doing things like simmering soups or sauces, chopping and steaming vegetables, cooking rice or pasta, baking meats or casseroles, etc. Microwaves reheat food with almost no loss of flavor or texture. Lots of meals have very little prep time, but need several hours to cook. If you utilize the prior evening for cooking time, when you come home tired at 6:30 p.m. the next day, it's simply a matter of warming things up or putting on the finishing touches.

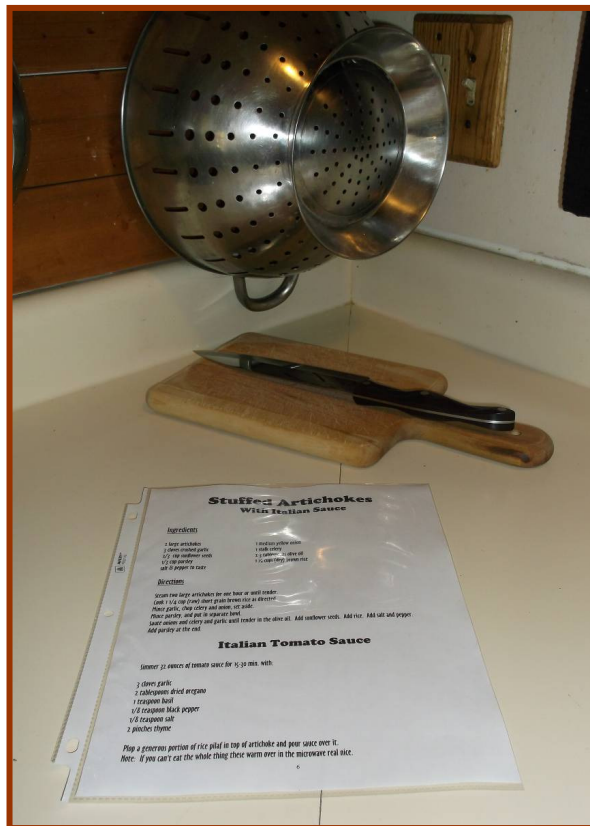
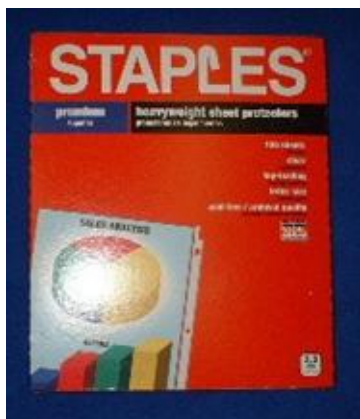
Tip #4: Plan to Have Left-Overs

Plan enough food to have leftovers for lunch or a second dinner. If you make meals you really like, you will look forward to eating them twice. If you don't like eating the same thing two meals in a row, you may want to skip a day in-between. For example eat Monday night's leftovers for lunch on Wednesday. To ensure good tasting leftovers **make sure you store them properly**. Always put leftovers into the smallest container you can fit them into. This minimizes air space which prevents spoilage and helps maintain the flavor and texture of the food. If you have a large amount of leftovers, as you use them, transfer them to smaller and smaller containers.

Tip #5 Collect Lots and Lots of Recipes

Ask friends and relatives for their favorites, invest in several new cook-books a year, and throw at least one magazine like "Family Circle", "Redbook" "Ladies' Home Journal" or "Better Homes and Gardens" into your shopping cart every month (even if you're a guy--they have great recipes). The sad fact is, for every ten recipes you try, you will probably find one or two that you really like. If you try a recipe and you don't like it, throw it away and chalk it up to experience!!! When you dine at other peoples' houses, if you like what is served, ask them for the recipe. Most people are delighted to share their culinary inventions or recipes passed down from their grandmas!!! Slowly but surely, you will put together a collection of recipes that you really like.

Organize your recipes in a BIG loose-leaf binder so it's easy to find them when you are doing your weekly menu planning. Decorate the front of your binder with a custom cover i.e. a picture of yourself pulling your favorite dish out of the oven. My recipe book has me with a huge bunch of kale as I love to entice people to eat kale when I have them over for dinner! Put your recipes into plastic page protectors so you can have them right on the kitchen counter while you are cooking. **You can buy a box of plastic page protectors at Staples for about \$20.00 at staples; worth the investment.**



Tip # 6 Learn How to Vary Your Diet:

For example you might try to cook at least two vegetarian dishes per week, two chicken, one fish and one or two red meat dishes. The recipes on this website can help you get started on the road to reclaiming the many joys

of good home cooked meals!!!! Feel free to throw out the ones you don't like and add the ones you do like to your loose-leaf binder. Make it a goal to add one new recipe a month to your family cookbook. Send me your favorites (if you're willing to share them) at: info@personalgrowthresources.org

Tip #7: Create a Well Equipped Kitchen

Having the appropriate tools for cooking makes it a much more pleasurable experience. Consumer goods in America are so inexpensive these days, it does not cost much to equip your kitchen with the things you need to be able to cook in an efficient manner. I recommend you outfit your kitchen with the following:

A large and small stainless steel colander	1 large serrated knife
1 large cast iron frying pan	1 large chef's chopping knife
3 medium Teflon type frying pans	3 small serrated knives
1 large (12 inch) Teflon type frying pan	A set of five multi-sized aluminum bowls
A timer	A blender
1 large and 1 small cutting board	3 rubber spatulas
A cheese grater	Misc. cooking spoons and spatulas
9 x 9 square baking dish	9 x 12 baking dish
1 medium casserole dish	cookie sheet
10 quart pan with lid	5 quart pan with lid
Two 3 quart pans with lids	A set of measuring cups
A set of measuring spoons	Food storage containers (lots of sizes)

A set of ramekins *



* Ramekins are small glass bowls used by chefs to store recipe ingredients while cooking i.e. minced garlic, spices, oil, etc.

A pan protector (aka) heat diffuser



** A pan protector is placed underneath your pan so that you can slowly cook things without burning them on the bottom. I can't function without one. They sell them at Ace hardware for about \$7.00.

Tip #9: Keep Your Pantry Well Stocked

Once you start cooking regular, well-rounded meals, you will get a sense of what kinds of items you need to keep in your pantry so that you have all non-perishable ingredients on hand that you will need to cook each week.

There's nothing worse than getting half way through a recipe and discovering that you are out of something that goes in it. If you shop at a food co-op, you can buy spices in bulk and just keep a small amount of a wide variety of spices on your spice rack without them going stale. You should keep backups of all your non-perishable items; flour, pasta noodles, condiments, oils, canned goods, vinegars, etc. In order to do this you need to **always** stop for a second when you break into the back-up jar or box or bag of something and **add this item to your grocery list** so you immediately replace your back-up. The following is a list of things I keep on hand in my pantry.

- Apricot Preserves**
- Baking Soda and Baking Powder**
- Barley**
- Black Beans, Canned**
- Bread Crumbs**
- Cajun Seasoning**
- Cornmeal**
- Flour, White and Soft Whole Wheat**
- Hoisen Sauce**
- Garlic, fresh**
- Gingerroot, Fresh**
- Honey**
- Ketchup**
- Lawry's Seasoning Salt**
- Lemon Juice**
- Lentils**
- Louisiana hot sauce**
- Milk, powdered**
- Mayonnaise**
- Miso, red**
- Mustard, Dijon and Yellow**
- Oil, Vegetable and Olive**
- Oil, Sesame and Toasted Sesame**
- Olives, Green**
- Onions, Red and Yellow**
- Oyster Sauce**
- Rice, Brown and White**
- Pasta, Fettuccini Noodles & Spaghetti,**
- Pasta, Shells & Spiral noodles**
- Red Pepper Flakes**
- Rice-A-Roni Chicken Flavor**
- Spices, (A Wide Selection)**
- Sugar, Brown and White**
- Soy Sauce/Tamari**
- Tahini**
- Tomato, Paste and Sauce**
- Tomatoes, whole canned and Stewed**
- Vegetable Broth Powder**
- Vinegar, Balsamic, White, Cider and Red Wine**
- Worcestershire Sauce**

Tip#10: Pay Attention to the Details of Cooking Instructions

Inexperienced cooks sometimes do not realize that the small details of cooking make all the difference whether a recipe tastes absolutely delicious, or mediocre. Cooking on a medium heat when you should be simmering, chopping ingredients too small or too big, using a cast iron pan when you should be using a Teflon pan or vice versa, crunching all the ingredients into a small pan when you need a large pan, putting too much or too little oil in the pan--all of these little things can ruin the flavors and textures of a recipe.

Likewise with dumping all the ingredients in the pan at once when the recipe says to do it step at a time. If you are going to expend the time and energy to cook, pay attention to details, so your food tastes great and feels worth the effort.

Tip#11: Invest in a Second Refrigerator (For Families)

If you are feeding a family, I highly recommend you invest in a second refrigerator that can be kept in the basement or garage. This allows you to do one large shopping trip per week, store leftovers, and to be able to easily find what you are looking for. There is nothing more frustrating than having to dig through an overcrowded refrigerator for what you need when you are cooking after a day at work. This will also give you more freezer space.

A Word About Soy Products.... For people unfamiliar with soy products, I have included the following photographs of hoisin sauce and soy sauce so you know what you are looking for when you go into a grocery store or health food store. Good brands of hoisin sauce are: Kame and House of Tsang. When buying **soy sauce** be very careful to **ONLY** buy natural soy sauce also called tamari or shoyu. Some brands are just cheap imitations i.e. La Choy soy sauce. La Choy soy sauce is not naturally aged soy sauce, it's a quick made version with caramel color added to make it look like the real thing!!! It will ruin a good recipe. Good brands of soy sauce are Eden and San-J.



Lastly, let me say that in order to reap the benefits of cooking healthy, nutritious meals for yourself and/or your family you will probably need to phase out the unhealthy foods you may be used to eating. Try to structure your weekly meals according to the following guidelines:

1) Eliminate or reduce to an absolute minimum the following high carb, low nutrition foods from your diet:

- Soft drinks
- White bread
- Potato chips and other junk food type snacks

Candy
Deep fried foods
Fruit juices (Eat whole fruit instead)

2) Limit -- Think of as more of a special treat:

Desserts
Mixed drinks with lots of sugar
Mexican food
Large portions of pasta
Cornbread, bagels
Large burgers with large buns
Corn Chips
Pancakes
Also be wary of energy bars unless you exercise a lot.

3) Your new healthy diet should consist of:

Legumes
Whole grains
Lean meats
Fish and seafood (baked not deep fried)
Lots and lots of fresh vegetables and salads
A moderate amount of fresh fruit
Nuts and seeds
A moderate amount of full-fat dairy products.*

*The low fat approach to weight control has proven a total failure so enjoy the fuller flavor of whole fat products and focus on reducing your carbs which are the real culprit of obesity. For more details about a low carb diet see my article on this website entitled: **Carb Counting-The Weight Loss Strategy That REALLY Works**

I do not mean to be coming off as a food fanatic because I am actually not one. I just believe in making the majority of your diet healthy, and then you can afford splurges like pie and ice cream, nachos, and lasagna a couple times week. The older you are the more important it is to limit your carbs as your metabolism slows down and usually your activity level you can't get away with eating as much junk food and desserts as you could when you were young. If you start cooking regular healthy nutritious meals for yourself, you will find that your need to binge on junk foods will decrease.