



Cooking on the Run

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Imagine this situation:

You glance at your family's calendar and you note the following:

3:30 – 4:15 Kayla's basketball practice
4:30 – 5:00 Taylor's piano lessons
5:15 – 5:45 Kayla's dance class
6:30 – 7:30 Ben's band concert

Sound familiar? For many families, a jam-packed schedule leaves little time for meal preparation or even eating together. You might be tempted to go through the fast-food drive-through more often than you would like. Grabbing food on the run may put a dent in your budget and make you question whether your family is getting the nutrition it needs.

Are you saving time?



Which of these statements are true of you?
Mark with an "X."

- I plan menus and write grocery lists so I have meal ideas and the food I need.
- I sometimes prepare portions of a meal in advance.
- I sometimes use leftovers as the basis for another meal.
- Other people in my household help with meal preparation and cleanup.
- I focus preparation efforts on one portion of the meal. For example, if the main course is time-consuming, I fix a simple vegetable or salad.
- I assemble equipment, cooking utensils and ingredients before I begin meal preparation.
- I use time-saving equipment, such as slow cookers and microwave ovens.
- I use the one-pot method. For example, I add vegetables to pasta that is cooking.

Think about the items you marked and the ones you did not mark. These are time-saving strategies and some may work for you.



Visit www.mypyramid.gov
for an online menu-planning tool.



Plan your menus

One of the best time-saving and health-promoting tips actually takes a little time up front: Plan your menus and your shopping trips. To get started, consider these tips to save time and promote better health:

- Look at store ads to provide ideas for menus. Aim for a wide variety of foods from all the MyPyramid food groups and then write down menus for a week. Save your list of menu ideas, perhaps in a binder, and include the shopping list with the menus. You may want to recycle your menu ideas in a few weeks.
- Consider items on your menu that allow you to cook once and eat twice. For example, having a roast for Sunday dinner provides the basis for roast beef sandwiches on Monday. Leftover grilled chicken can be used in soups, fajitas or other dishes.
- Consider using a computer to make your list. That way you can leave your staple items, such as milk, eggs, bread and juice, and add your needed items to the list.
- Keep a shopping list on your refrigerator so family members can add to the list during the week.
- If you know the store layout well enough, make a list based on the layout with subheadings such as “fresh produce,” “canned goods,” “meats” and “breads.” Some grocery stores provide a map.

Make your own freezer meals

Consider making your own “convenience foods” by preparing and freezing meals ahead of time. Many commercial convenience foods are high in fat and sodium.

- Choose your favorite recipes, but check the ingredients in the recipes. Entrees containing sour cream, mayonnaise and raw vegetables do not freeze well. Most of the time, you can leave these items out before freezing. The entree can be thawed and the extra ingredients can be added right before baking. Be sure to note ingredients to add when you label the entrees.
- Create a grocery list. If you are short on pans, consider buying some aluminum freezer pans.
- Set up your kitchen in assembly line fashion and plan for efficiency. For example, chop all the ingredients, such as onions, at the same time.
- Undercook starchy ingredients, such as pasta, rice and potatoes, because the casserole will be baked later and could become overcooked.
- Leave casserole toppings, such as breadcrumbs, off the casseroles so they don’t become soggy.
- Package in meal-sized portions whether you are cooking for an individual, couple or family. To free baking pans, you can line them with heavy-duty aluminum foil, bake and freeze. Then you can pop out the entree, seal securely and return to the freezer.
- To protect your food from freezer burn (dehydration of the contents leading to quality losses), use heavy-duty aluminum foil, freezer containers or freezer paper.
- Label the freezer container with the date and contents so your dinner menu does not feature “frozen surprise.” Include baking time on the label. For best quality, enjoy your home-made casseroles within three months.
- Be sure your freezer temperature is zero degrees Fahrenheit or lower.
- You can bake frozen casseroles or you can thaw them overnight in the refrigerator. The amount of baking time depends on the number of servings. For frozen, fully cooked casseroles, bake at 400 degrees for the maximum time stated in the recipe or until the contents reach an internal temperature of at least 165 degrees. For thawed, fully cooked casseroles, bake at the temperature directed in the recipe, but add about 15 minutes to the baking time. The internal temperature of the casserole should measure 165 degrees.

Make slow cooker meals

Slow cookers do the cooking while you are away. Here are some food safety tips from the U.S. Department of Agriculture:


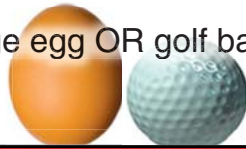





- Always thaw meat or poultry in the refrigerator or microwave before putting it in a slow cooker. Make foods with a high-moisture content, such as chili, soup, stew or spaghetti sauce. Cut the food into chunks or small pieces to ensure thorough cooking.
- Fill the cooker no less than half full and no more than two-thirds full. Vegetables cook slower than meat and poultry in a slow cooker, so if using them, put vegetables in first, at the bottom and around the sides. Then add meat and cover the food with liquid, such as broth, water or barbecue sauce.
- If possible, turn the cooker on the highest setting for the first hour of cooking time and then to low for the remainder of the cooking time.
- Keep the cover in place to ensure proper heating.
- Don't refrigerate the leftovers in the slow cooker. Place the food in shallow pans and refrigerate within two hours of the time the cooking is finished. For buffets or potlucks, the food will remain safe as long as the temperature remains at 140 degrees in the slow cooker.
- Reheat leftovers on the stove, in a microwave or in a conventional oven to an internal temperature of 165 degrees.



Do you know your MyPyramid Plan? For a personalized eating plan, visit www.mypyramid.gov.

Can you size up a portion?

Size up your portions with these visual clues. As shown, one-half of a baseball is the same size as $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of mashed potatoes.

Visual Clue	Portion size
 $\frac{1}{2}$ baseball	$\frac{1}{2}$ cup of mashed potatoes
 large egg OR golf ball	$\frac{1}{4}$ cup of dried cranberries
 pingpong ball	2 tablespoons of peanut butter
 check book	3 ounces of fish
 card deck	3 ounces of meat or poultry
 6 dice	$1\frac{1}{2}$ ounces of natural cheese (cheddar, Swiss)
 thumb tip	1 teaspoon of margarine or butter