

easy meal planning

BY MELISSA RINGSTAFF



**15 MINUTE MEAL
PLANNING**

**TIPS TO SAVE
YOU MONEY**

**MEAL PREP 101
FOR BEGINNERS**

AVIRTUOUSWOMAN.ORG

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MEAL PLANNING MADE EASY

BY MELISSA RINGSTAFF

I totally get how busy the dinner hour can be. Really, truly. These days I'm often thankful that we just had something to eat. The older my kids get, the harder it is to pull us all together at the same time for a homemade meal. But, it's one of those things that is so, very, worth it.



MENU PLANNING 101

Most weeks, unless things go really wrong, I plan out all 21 meals plus snacks for the week. I can't even begin to tell you how much knowing what we'll be eating each day helps me out!

By taking an hour or so on Sunday morning to plan out our menu for the week, I get it all done at once - which means I don't have to think about what we're going to eat an hour before every one is starving. Talk about stress relief!



"MEAL PLANNING IS A NOBLE TASK."

We very rarely eat out and since I home school my kids, we are together most of the time and we eat a hot meal for most our meals.

It's important to me that we eat healthy. By planning ahead, I know if beans need soaking or if I need to take a freezer meal out to thaw in the morning. I also know what breads I need to bake for the week and any other preparations that need to be made in order for my family to be nourished at meal time.

"WHEN YOU SERVE YOUR FAMILY, YOU SERVE THE CREATOR."

Now, don't get me wrong. There are days when the menu plan flies out the window. And on those days I make one of our family favorite "go to" meals. And that's okay, because life doesn't have to be perfect or always go as planned to be amazing.

MENU PLANNING 101

First of all, let's talk about what should go into your menu. If you're like me, you're concerned about the quality of food your family eats and you want to be sure that your family is getting enough vitamins and minerals to keep them healthy.

THINK RAINBOW

When planning your meals, think about the rainbow. You want to choose a variety of foods over the course of the week that are colorful.

You always want to try to choose foods that are different colors in the same meal. When you serve food that is all in the same color family, not only are you probably missing out on some necessary vitamins, but it doesn't make for a very appetizing plate. Food really should appeal to the eye as well as the stomach!

Also, remember that white potatoes are a starch and corn is a starch. So, if you are serving a starch, you really need a green veggie to balance it out.

FAMILY FAVORITES AND PICKY EATERS

Every family has their favorites. And some of your family members probably have foods they don't care for. I would encourage you not to indulge your children too much when preparing meals – they shouldn't be allowed to be too picky. But it is important to not completely disregard your child's preferences either.

So, for instance, if you are making Brussels sprouts for dinner and you know your child doesn't really care for Brussels sprouts, make something to go with them, mashed potatoes perhaps, that your child loves. In my house everyone has to eat at least a few bites of everything I cook. My kids are older now and they will eat pretty much anything I feed them - including beets, kale, spinach, and tofu. And they ask for seconds.

HOW MUCH TIME DO YOU HAVE?

When planning your meals for each day, be sure to take into account what your schedule is like for each day.

So, in our house, we are gone all day every Wednesday. I know that I need to pack a lunch for everyone on Wednesdays and it's nice if I can make a meal in the slow cooker or take out a freezer meal to heat up when we arrive home in the evening.

THEMED NIGHTS

One way to make it easier to come up with ideas is to assign each day a theme. Later in this book you'll find the ultimate list of themed dinner night ideas!



15 MINUTE MEAL PLANNING

With a house full of kids, some of which have a few picky eating issues, a husband who works all day, plus all those after school activities keeping us out late, figuring out what we're going to have for dinner can turn into a trip to the fast food drive thru.

The only thing that makes dealing with the challenge of dinner time around here is my meal plan. I plan my entire week of meals in under 15 minutes, and while it might sound like an impossible feat, I'm living proof it can be done!



"MEAL PLANNING DOESN'T HAVE TO BE HARD."

MASTER LIST OF MEAL IDEAS

I have a huge recipe bank, which you'll read more about later in this book, and it's my secret weapon to putting together a quick meal plan. It has all of my breakfast, lunch, and dinner ideas all in one place for me to pick from, with the ingredients list right there as well.

It makes planning out my meals for the week a breeze and only takes a few minutes to come up with ideas! I take these ideas and put them in my menu planner.

"PLANNING MY MENU EACH WEEK SAVES MY SANITY AT MEAL TIME."

The first step in being prepared for meal time is to set aside a time each week when you can sit down and plan your menu for the week. Some women prepare for an entire month! I just plan for the week ahead. I like to cook a variety of foods – comfort foods (family favorites) and I like to try out new recipes on a regular basis.

Recently, I was reading an article about being good to our husbands with the food we prepare. I started thinking about my own cooking style. The last few years I have been cooking more and more ethnic meals which I love. In fact everyone in the family seems to enjoy them. But as I thought about it, I realized that those meals that get the most praise from my husband and children are the good old fashioned “meat and potatoes” kind of meals. That may sound a little funny considering we are a vegetarian family. However, they love for me to make my version of “meatloaf,” oatmeal patties with gravy, and mashed potatoes are always a hit. Casseroles are also a favorite.

These are the kinds of food I grew up eating! I struggle with the desire to serve really healthy food and serving food we really love to eat. After giving it a good bit of thought, I decided I needed to find a healthy balance between the two.

Make a list of your family’s favorite foods. You could even get really organized and make the list according to main dish, side dish, salad, soups, etc. like I did; or make the list according to main ingredient – broccoli, eggplant, pasta, etc.

On menu planning day, sit down with your list, your blank menu chart, and a few cookbooks or other recipe sources. Choose mostly from your tried and true favorites and then select a few new ones to try out.

USE A ROTATING SYSTEM

Another great way to make your meal planning go faster is by creating a rotating system such as Meatless Monday, Taco Tuesday, and so on. If you are short on time, create a rotating system that works well for your family. This system may not work well for every family, but it is a great way to save your meal plan when you've run out of ideas.

REPEAT THE MEALS THAT WORK

Before you start your meal planning, ask your family members to help you create a top twenty recipe list and keep this list handy. These are your go to meals when you run out of ideas. If you look at my meal plan, you'll find a lot of the same dinners on my menu again and again, because it works! These dinners are staples in our household and are easy to prepare and easy on the budget. This works well if you have a picky eater, as boring and repetitive is better than a daily food struggle.

Despite the myth that meal planning takes hours of careful planning, you can easily create meals your family will look forward to each week without all the hassle. With a few carefully crafted systems in place, you'll be on your way to meal planning success in no time.

10 TIPS TO SIMPLIFY MEAL PLANNING

- Meal planning saves time and money when you are grocery hopping since you will have a list of everything you need.
- It saves you stress from trying to figure out what to cook every day.
- It saves you money that you might otherwise have spent dining out.
- It also helps you feed your family a variety of healthy meals.

"MEAL PLANNING DOESN'T HAVE TO BE HARD."

However, meal planning can sometimes be overwhelming if you aren't used to planning ahead.

1. Decide which meals will take priority. Cooking 3 meals a day is not feasible for everyone. Instead of trying to channel Martha Stewart for breakfast, lunch, and supper, choose one meal to focus on. Many people focus on supper because it is typically the meal that most families eat together and often the largest meal of the day.

"PLANNING MY MENU EACH WEEK SAVES MY SANITY AT MEAL TIME."



If you decide to focus on the evening meal, you can still plan for breakfasts and lunches, just make them simple. Breakfast is the most important meal of the day. If you aren't in the habit of eating breakfast, I would encourage you to start making it a habit. Children especially need to eat breakfast before school, too.

You might plan a nice home cooked supper and then plan basic meals for breakfast and lunch.

2. Consider your family's favorite meals and plan around those. You could even enlist your family's help in meal planning by asking each of them to tell you directly what their favorite meals are so that you can add them into the rotation.

Tip: Make a list of family favorites and keep it in your planner for quick ideas when meal planning!

3. Always keep your staple ingredients on hand. When you keep your refrigerator and pantry well-stocked, it can definitely alleviate the stress of trying to figure out what to eat. It can also minimize the number of times you have to go to the grocery store.

Knowing that you have all of the ingredients on hand makes it easier to stick to your meal plan.

4. Have a list of recipe resources for when you run out of ideas. Of course, there is always Pinterest. If you already have an account, you know that there is no shortage of recipes to try out. Keep a few of your favorite cook books and your recipe box on hand too! Some other great resources are: Allrecipes.com, Yummly.com, FoodNetwork.com

5. Make use of your slow cooker. If you have a crock pot...use it! There are a wide variety of crock pot recipes out there using all kinds of ingredients. However, the biggest advantage in my mind is that crock pots (or slow cookers) are a great way to cook healthy meals for your family without having to spend a lot of time over the stove.

While the food is cooking, you can actually attend to other tasks.

6. Plan meals based on what is in season and what is on sale. If one of your goals for meal planning is to save money, this is definitely something that you should consider doing more often. For example, summertime is a great time to make tomato-based dishes.

You might want to have your local grocery sale flyers handy when you're making your meal plan. Also, make your grocery list as you plan your meals to be sure you won't be missing an ingredient!

7. Plan ways to use your leftovers. If you usually have leftovers, plan some ways to use them in other meals. Also, plan for leftovers – cook extra for lunch the next day! Or, rework an ingredient you have left over into a new and different recipe.

8. Consider having a theme. It makes it easier to decide which meals to cook. For example, your week could look like this: Mexican Monday, Taco Tuesday, Pasta Wednesday, Crockpot Thursday, Pizza Friday, Casserole Saturday, Simple Sunday. Just looking at this list, you have already decided on at least one dish for each day.

9. Rotate your menu every two weeks. This way, instead of having to come up with 30-31 days' worth of meals, you only have to come up with 14 days. You will also still have a great deal of variety since you will probably only eat the same meal twice in one month. Or, if you like even more variety, plan a 30 day rotating meal plan!

10. Plan every week or month on the same day until it becomes a regular habit. Once meal planning becomes a habit, you will do it without even having to think about it. I usually do my meal planning on Sunday afternoon. It doesn't matter what day works for you, just that you sit down at a regular time and do it!

5 WAYS TO MAKE MEAL PLANNING MORE ENJOYABLE

Meal planning can feel like a lot of work and not much fun, but it's one chore that will save you so much time and energy and brain power later in the week when you are pressed for time and stressed. Before I started meal planning years ago, I would find myself scrambling at the last minute to get supper on the table more often than I'd like to admit!

"MEAL PLANNING DOESN'T HAVE TO BE HARD."

GET THE FAMILY INVOLVED

Everyone has a picky eater in the household, and if you can't think of one, it might just be you! Enlist the help of your family members to help put together your meal plan. Your husband may be more excited about eating something he helped plan. If you have a picky five year old who is currently only interested in eating a mac and cheese diet, then getting your child involved will make it easier to come up with ideas and make meal planning more enjoyable.

"PLANNING MY MENU EACH WEEK SAVES MY SANITY AT MEAL TIME."



I often will ask my kids for menu suggestions when I sit down. “What would you like to eat this week?” If it’s feasible, I try to make it happen. The benefit for me is that I don’t have to think so hard!

When kids are involved in the planning and preparation of meals, they learn to make better choices when it comes to food and they are also more willing to try new foods.

INVEST IN A PRETTY PLANNER

Everything is more fun with a pretty notebook or list pad! Get rid of that boring yellow legal pad and find yourself a menu plan you’ll love to look at each week. Find something that you’ll have fun writing in and that’s nice to look at. Just think of how much more fun you’ll have meal planning when you’re writing down your shopping list.

My Purpose 31 Planners from AVirtuousWoman.org have meal planning sections included.

LIGHT A CANDLE AND SIP SOME TEA

One of the biggest complaints when it comes to meal planning is that people are too exhausted or too tired. Before you head to the couch to veg out, grab that pretty notebook of yours and pour yourself a cup of tea – my favorite is hibiscus tea. It can make your meal planning experience a little more enjoyable.

INCLUDE NEW RECIPES EACH WEEK

Believe it or not, one of the secrets to a successful meal plan is to keep your meals exciting. Meatless Mondays and Taco Tuesdays can make it easy to get into a rut of the same old food. After all, you probably set up your meal plan this way to help you save time and money. Find at least one night a week to make a new recipe that you’re really excited to try. You’ll get to try new dishes, and you’ll be cooking something different for a change.

GIVE YOURSELF A NIGHT OFF

We all may love cooking {at least I do}, but none of us want to do it every single day for the rest of our lives. Some nights, we don't want to do the dishes or cook. Give yourself permission to take the night off. Whether it's paper plates and Chinese food or just a simple frozen pizza, it's important to give yourself a break once in a while.

These days my family is so busy we are known to buy take out once or twice a month or three times. I used to think that was a terrible thing, but one day I realized that it really is okay. We still eat healthy. We still make good food choices. We still eat our meals together. But in this busy season of life when I'm frequently traveling with my teens... eating out or getting take out from time to time makes life a little easier!

Planning your meals each week doesn't have to take a ton of time, and it can also be quite fun! You can also start preparing your meals ahead of time to make meal planning even less stressful.

MEAL PLANNING & BUSY DAYS

I totally get how busy the dinner hour can be. Really, truly. These days I'm often thankful that we just had something to eat. The older my kids get the harder it is to pull us all together at the same time for a homemade meal. But, it's one of those things that is so, very, worth it.

Even if your kids are younger than mine, preparing three meals a day, 7 days a week can be a challenge. Here are some great ideas and resources to help you in your meal planning.

Sunday afternoons are when I usually sit down with my meal planner and decide what we're going to eat for the week. If it wasn't for meal planning, I'd be lost come time for supper – or breakfast or lunch for that matter!

Our schedule these days is busier than ever and it's important to me that we still eat as many meals together as a family as possible. I used to spend A LOT of time cooking every day – in fact, I had set really high expectations for myself.

I spent hours in the kitchen everyday cooking three hot meals nearly every day of the week. I cooked large meals for our very large extended family on a weekly basis. I made most of the bread we ate each week from scratch. It's no secret I love to cook. And I love good food.

But something had to give.

One day, I was thinking about how hard life seemed and I realized a lot of it – had to do with my own expectations for myself. I wanted to be the “perfect” mom, the “perfect” wife – the “perfect” everything. Or, in other words, I had this ideal image in my mind of what perfect looked like. I love my family so much I wanted to be totally awesome all the time.

And then one day it hit me. I realized that it was okay to take a few shortcuts. It's okay to not cook everything from scratch and it's okay to make simple meals on a day in and day out basis. I can still pour my heart {and time} into a meal when I am able to.

So, these days, with our crazy wonderful schedule keeping us hopping, I plan for simple meals that taste great but don't take a lot of time to prepare. I use the slow cooker as often as possible. And I love to prepare make-ahead freezer recipes when I have the time – to save me time later. Other days, I just pick one of my go-to meals that's easy to prepare and quick!

Meal planning is a life saver on busy days. I think about my schedule for the week and I plan meals that fit the days activities. So, I know Tuesdays are always go, go, go and I love starting my slow cooker first thing in the morning so supper cooks without me! Make some biscuits or cornbread – and well, I can have dinner on the table in no time – hot and fresh.

Meal time is so important. Not only do our bodies need nourishment, but the soul of our family needs nurturing too. Dinner around the table helps to feed our family's heart, mind, and tummies! Creating warm memories around the table doesn't mean you have to slave in the kitchen for hours – it means you do the best you can to get some good, healthy food on the table and then focus on the conversation and laughter.

3 MEAL PLANNING TIPS FOR BUSY DAYS

1. Choose meals that fit your schedule.
2. Use a printable meal planner.
3. Have a list of your family's favorite Go-To Meals.

A big part of meal planning is the grocery shopping. Well, if you're like me you want to get in and out as soon as possible. We live in a small town. That means we do the grocery shopping when we're in the vicinity of our favorite stores.

We keep a well stocked pantry which helps us save money. So, whenever we do grocery shop we can fill in the gaps with what we need and what might be on sale. My husband does the bulk of our grocery shopping, but if I happen to be with him, I'll tag along.

GROCERY SHOPPING & MEAL PLANNING

Before you can cook a delicious meal for your family, you will need to have a pantry stocked with good foods. You will be able to prepare a wide variety of recipes if you have the basics already in your cupboard.

Grocery shopping with small children in tow is not always fun, so if you are able to do this when your husband is able to watch the children, you will be able to get done faster and probably save more money.



"CLEAN OUT THE FRIDGE BEFORE YOU GO TO THE GROCERY STORE."

Another option would be to trade off grocery shopping days with a friends and watch each other's children on grocery day.

You want to prepare for your shopping trip. A good day to plan your weekly shopping is the day you clean out the refrigerator or perhaps the day after. Plan your meals for the coming week. I typically do this a week ahead of time, but you can do it however you prefer.

"A WELL STOCKED PANTRY MAKES MEAL PLANNING EASIER."

To shop wisely and save more money, when you are planning your meals, have the weekly sales flyer available and plan as many meals around good deals as you can.

Make a shopping list of those items that are missing from your pantry. Make a list of those special things you need to prepare the recipes for each meal. Make a list of other items that you will need to prepare desserts and/ or snacks during the week. When planning snacks, think healthy – dried fruit versus candy, baked chips versus fried...

Remember that some foods are wants and other foods are needs. Foods that provide good nutrition are the needs! Try to limit the amount of processed and refined foods that you bring into your home. Whole foods – living foods – will provide the nutrition your family needs.

When planning your meals you want to think of colors. If your plate is all one color, you are missing out on important vitamins and minerals. For instance, serving sides of potatoes and corn mean serving foods that are similar – both starches. Instead of serving these in the same meal, try serving a green vegetable, a white vegetable and a yellow/ orange vegetable.

It can be fun to read cookbooks to get new ideas. You can learn a lot about what foods and flavors work well together by reading recipes. I love to cook foods from different cultures. By offering a wide variety of foods and flavors to your children when they are young, you will train them to not be picky eaters. I believe that children should be required to eat at least a small portion of everything you serve. When I was young, I didn't much care for turnip greens, but after years of eating my greens, I grew to love them! It is possible to train – or even retrain – your taste buds!

Ever heard the term “acquired taste?” This is because some foods do take a certain level of “getting used to” before you fully enjoy them.

When planning your grocery shopping, go through your coupons for bargains on items you regularly purchase or would like to try. Use coupons as much as possible, but always compare prices and brands. Store brands very often are as good a quality as the name brand product. Buy in bulk those items that you use frequently when they go on sale. You can begin using a price book and track sales and sale prices.

5 TIPS TO MAKE GROCERY SHOPPING EASIER

1. Plan your menu. Meal planning saves the day at my house. I like to plan every meal and snacks so there are no surprises or brain crunching when everyone is hungry.
2. Make a list. You can look over sale flyers at home to help you find deals. Also, use your meal plan to help you make your list. Be sure to check your pantry and refrigerator for food that needs to be used up. Writing the list out according to the layout of your grocery store can be helpful as well.
3. Find a babysitter. If you're able to, leave the kids at home with your husband. Or, find a friend you can trade off with. She can watch your kids and you can watch her kids while you grocery shop.
4. Eat before you shop. Going to the grocery store hungry is a recipe for disaster. You're more likely to go over budget and buy things you don't need or that are unhealthy.
5. Stock up on staples when they're on sale. This one saves me so much time and money. If your pantry is always filled with a good stockpile of foods you regularly use, you can shop less and save more.

SAVING MONEY AT THE GROCERY STORE

In our house, saving money is not an option. It's either sink or swim! Living on a pastor's salary is not easy unless you implement some great money saving strategies.

Grocery shopping is one item in our budget that is flexible – meaning we can spend less if we need or want to. So here are a few tips we use each month when grocery shopping to get the most for our money.



**"STOCKPILE
ITEMS WHEN
THEY GO ON
SALE SO YOU
NEVER PAY
FULL PRICE."**

1. **Stockpile items you use on a regular basis.** This is smart for several reasons. First of all, you can purchase your stockpile items when they are on sale, meaning you won't ever have to pay full price for them. Secondly, you have items on hand for a quick meal when you can't get to the grocery store. Thirdly, having a small stockpile of items you regularly use insures that in the event of an emergency you aren't scrambling to feed your family.

**"GROCERY IS ONE
ITEM IN OUR BUDGET
THAT IS FLEXIBLE."**

2. Use coupons when it makes sense. Just because you have a coupon does not mean you really need the item. Ask yourself these questions:

Is this a product I will use?

Can I purchase a different brand or off-brand for cheaper?

Can I wait until this product goes on sale and save even more money with the coupon?

3. Don't be Brand Loyal. I know lots of people love their favorite "brand" of a particular product and can't imagine using something else. But, in my experience, many "store brands" are just as good – or better – than nationally recognized brands. Lots of stores guarantee their brand against the national brand of the same type – so trying out a new store brand certainly can't hurt!

4. Amazon.com Subscribe and Save. There are a number of food products that my husband and I purchase on a regular basis through Amazon's Subscribe and Save option. We are Amazon Prime Members and get free two day shipping. Not everything on Amazon is at the best price available, but if you know your prices, you can find a lot of great deals.

5. Use Store Loyalty Cards. It only takes a few minutes to sign up, but the savings are definitely worth it.

6. Shop at Big Lots. Big Lots is a great place to find groceries. We regularly shop at Big Lots for food and other items. Every few weeks, Big Lots will have a 20% off everything in the store sale. We like to stockpile canned goods like black beans and other good deals during the sale. I also recently noticed that Big Lots now accepts EBT cards.

9. Use a Grocery Price Book. Unless you're like my husband and have every good deal price already in your head, a price book will help you track sales, learn what is a great deal and what is not, and compare prices at different stores.

10. Shop at Salvage Stores. Salvage stores are like little known treasures. My husband and I buy a large percentage of our groceries at salvage stores. If you've never shopped in a salvage store you may not think it's a place you want to shop. So, here are some things I've learned about salvage stores:

- Salvage stores are not fancy – in fact they may look dingy.
- You can find organic foods and name brand food your family loves.
- I often find gluten free products.
- Some salvage stores do sell produce.
- Salvage stores sell some items that are near their expiration date or already expired. Read the dates. Just because an item has passed it's "best if used by" date does not mean it's inedible or unsafe to eat.
- They sell products that have been scratched, dented, or boxes that are torn {but the bag is not punctured}. Use your common sense when shopping at a salvage store.

MEAL PREP 101

One of the keys to success when it comes to meal planning is the ability to do a little meal prep in advance. By preparing some of your meals, or even just dicing the vegetables ahead of time, you can prepare your meals with less work and less time.

Here are a few things you'll want to keep in mind before you begin meal prepping:

What goal are you trying to achieve through meal prepping?

Do you want to lose weight by eating better, save money, or free up your time?

Do you want to save time on busy – or busy weeknights?

Do you want to focus only on dinners? Lunch boxes? Healthy snacks? Freezer cooking?

When will you do your meal prepping?

**"PREPPING
MEALS AHEAD
OF TIME SAVES
YOU TIME
WHEN YOU'RE
OUT OF TIME."**

**"PREP YOUR MEALS
FOR THE WEEK ON
SUNDAY AFTERNOON
OR ON GROCERY
DAY."**



Meal prepping doesn't have to be a Sunday night special. Having the flexibility to pick what to eat on the fly is the best strategy, so pick a day that fits your lifestyle.

Now that we've covered a few basic things, let's start meal prepping!

STEP 1: PLAN YOUR MEALS

Before you start making anything, you need to know what meals you will be having throughout the week. A few days before your meal prep day, make a list of meals you want to eat for the following week. This will make sure you only buy what you need for those meals when you go shopping, which will also help you save money!

STEP 2: CREATE YOUR SHOPPING LIST & GET TO THE STORE

Nothing will kill your productivity faster than being mid-prep and realizing you are missing a key ingredient. To avoid being in this situation, you want to make a grocery list. Go through each individual recipe (even the ones you know by heart) and write down all of the ingredients you'll need to make each dish. Then, using your list, check what ingredients you have on hand and mark them off the list. Afterwards, you'll only be left with what you need to buy from the store and you won't miss a thing!

STEP 3: HAVE THE RIGHT TOOLS

Having the right tools for meal prepping is a big help. Here are a few of my suggestions:

Slow Cooker. I use my slow cooker as much as possible to save time during the week, but you can also prep meals and make meals ahead of the time with your slow cooker!

Instant Pot. Prep your meals quickly with an Instant Pot. Pre-cook food twice as fast!

Mason Jars. I like storing snacks, salads, and leftovers in Mason jars. You can also make overnight oatmeal in them!

Glass Pyrex Containers with Lids. These work when a Mason jar doesn't!

Half Sheet Pan. These are perfect for pre-cooking and roasting veggies in the oven. Not to mention roasting vegetables gives them so much flavor!

Muffin Tin. You can make more than just muffins in a muffin tin!

Bento Style Lunch Boxes. These easy open lunch boxes keep food separate and stack inside your fridge!

Cutting Board. I love my bamboo cutting board.

Menu Planner. Planning your meals and getting them prepped for the week is so much easier when you have a menu planner! I use my Purpose 31 Planner for planning our meals.

STEP 4: START PREPPING!

Now that you have all of your ingredients and your meal plan handy, it's time to start prepping. I usually like to prep meals for the week on Sunday but you can choose any day of the week that works best for you. You might like to do this the day you come home from the grocery store. Do what works for you. Once you've finished preparing each meal, store them in an airtight container and put them in the fridge or freezer for an easy meal!

Here are some ideas for prepping meals in advance.

- pre-cook meat
- chop vegetables
- wash and prepare fruit
- wash and dry lettuce
- prepare salads
- remove wire tie from fresh herbs and place stems in a glass of water
- make homemade “uncrustable” sandwiches and freeze
- make lunches and store in fridge using your favorite lunch container
- store healthy snacks in glass mason jars or air tight containers

Meal prepping doesn't have to be difficult. If you're short on time or can't put together a full meal ahead of time, then do what you can. Just having your vegetables pre-chopped can save you tons of time in the kitchen later. Making a bunch of different cuisines at the same time can also help you plan themed nights, reorder your meals for unexpected guests, and more!

HOW TO PLAN FOR LEFTOVERS

One of my favorite ways to save time in the kitchen is to cook double batches of food – more than my family will eat in one sitting – and save the leftovers for later in the week.

There are so many benefits of using leftovers. Not only are you preventing food from going to waste, but you're also ensuring that you have healthy meals ready to go on busy nights. This is also a great way to save money. When you're utilizing leftovers, you will naturally spend less money on groceries.



"PLAN FOR LEFTOVERS AND SAVE TIME DURING THE BUSY WEEK."

But, when you plan for leftovers you're really doing double duty in the kitchen!

Leftovers can be a busy mom's best friend. You can transform leftovers into new meals, which allows you to have a healthy dinner with very little effort. Let's take a closer look at how to plan for leftovers and what the benefits are.

"MAKE DOUBLE BATCHES OF YOUR FAVORITE MEALS AND SAVE FOR LATER."

MAKE IT PART OF YOUR MEAL PLAN

When you sit down to create your meal plan for the week, incorporate meals that will utilize leftovers. For example, one night you may plan that you will pull a meal from the freezer. On another night, you may plan a meal that will utilize leftovers from the previous night. Start by trying to utilize leftovers once a week and then go from there. Once you see how easy it can be, you'll be adding more leftover meals to your meal plan.

Also, when making your meal plan, you will want to think about how you can transform one dish into another one. Transforming leftovers is the key to creating meals your family will love while also saving time in the kitchen.

For example, if you're making vegetarian chili the first night, use the leftovers to create chili mac. If you're making Mexican rice and refried beans the first night, roll the leftovers inside tortillas for burritos. Add a few extra ingredients and you've got a tasty meal your family will love.

START WITH LARGER MEALS

The easiest way to plan for leftovers is to make larger meals than your family will eat. This ensures that you have leftovers for the next day – or later in the week. Don't worry that the food will go to waste! When you plan your menu for the week, plan for leftovers and then you'll be sure to use them up – and your family won't know the difference!

FREEZE MEALS FOR LATER

Another great tip is to make a double batch of a recipe and then freeze the second batch. Some meals freeze better than others. However, soups, chili, stews, and some casseroles freeze beautifully. You can make a large dish the first night and then portion the meal into smaller dishes and freeze. These meals are perfect for those nights that you're really busy.

For instance, if you are making enchiladas, go ahead and make a second casserole dish of the enchiladas and freeze the second dish to bake on another night. This is often called batch cooking and it's a real time saver!

I know most of us could use a little more time in our day - planning for leftovers is one way to find that time!



MAKE AHEAD MEAL PLANNING

Sunday is my day {usually} to plan for the week. I like to plan my menu, make notes and to-do lists, and in general make sure I'm ready for the week ahead.

It's important to me that my family eats well. I want our meals to be well rounded, healthy, and taste good. Cooking from scratch can be difficult when your day is so busy, so having a plan really helps me!

**"PLAN FOR
BUSY DAYS
AND GIVE
YOURSELF
GRACE."**

It's important when planning meals to take into account your schedule. It doesn't make much sense to plan a meal that takes 1 hour to prepare if your only going to have 30 minutes to get dinner on the table.

This week I planned several make-ahead breakfasts as well as a slow cooker meal for one of my busiest evenings.

On Sunday, my daughters helped me bake up three batches of buttermilk Tea Towel Biscuits.

**"MAKE MEALS
AHEAD OF TIME &
FREEZE FOR LATER
AND SAVE TIME ON
BUSY DAYS."**



We ate the first batch with gravy on Sunday morning. With the rest of the biscuits I planned three days worth of breakfasts:

- Monday: Sausage Biscuits
- Tuesday: Egg and Cheese Sandwiches
- Wednesday: Biscuits with Tomato Gravy

For Monday, I made the sandwiches up ahead of time and then individually wrapped them with plastic wrap and put them in a gallon size freezer bag. I didn't freeze them, just put them in the refrigerator and we ate them at room temperature – but you could definitely heat them up!

Tuesday's sandwiches went into the freezer, individually wrapped in plastic and in a gallon size freezer bag. To reheat, I took the sandwiches out, unwrapped them from the plastic, and then wrapped them in tin foil and heated them at 350 degrees for about 15 minutes. They were delicious and didn't taste like they'd been frozen!

The rest of the biscuits were placed in a freezer bag and I'll reheat them the same way tomorrow!

Other ideas for make-ahead breakfasts:

- freeze the ingredients for a fresh smoothie in a single freezer bag
- overnight oatmeal
- overnight French Toast casserole
- crock pot breakfasts

MEAL PREP FOR THE WEEK

On Sunday I also prepared a Broccoli Casserole for our dinner on Tuesday night. Knowing that Tuesday would be busy, I planned an easy meal – Sloppy Joes.

The Broccoli Casserole is an easy addition, but it takes a little while to steam the broccoli and prepare the sauce. Doing those things ahead of time really helped ease my meal prep on Tuesday afternoon.

There are several ways you can prepare food for the week on Sunday or your planning day:

- chop fresh fruit and vegetables, store in the fridge
- boil eggs
- pack lunches for the week
- cook like ingredients and divide for individual recipes
- prepare salad ingredients
- prepare and/or bake casseroles
- bake bread

COOK ONCE, EAT TWICE

One of my favorite ways to make a busy day easier is to double a recipe and freeze the second one for the following week or an upcoming busy day. Doing this is very little extra work and it can really make a big difference on a hectic day. Some meals that work well:

- lasagna
- enchiladas
- macaroni and cheese
- patties
- biscuits
- muffins
- English muffin pizzas
- squash patties

For sure, meal planning is one of those things I {usually} do each week that makes a huge difference in my day – and in how we eat. I definitely miss my meal plan when it doesn't happen!

GO TO MEALS FOR BUSY DAYS

These days of trying to juggle it all, I realized some time ago that something had to go. For years I made everything from scratch. I like to feed my family healthy food and we try to avoid foods that have a lot of unnatural ingredients.

And while I still work to feed my family the very best ingredients, I'm not so particular about everything being "homemade" or "from scratch."

"CREATE A GO TO MEAL LIST FOR DAYS WHEN LIFE IS CRAZY."

I still cook delicious meals on a regular basis. I still make a lot of homemade food, but I often rely on quick and easy meals.

The thing is, food doesn't have to take a long time to prepare to be delicious and sometimes it's okay to get a little help from your favorite store.

And really, what you serve at meal time is not nearly as important as the time you spend together eating.

"WHAT YOU EAT ISN'T AS IMPORTANT AS THE PEOPLE YOU SHARE YOUR FOOD WITH."



Everyone needs a handful of Go To Meals for those days when you just need something quick that you don't have to think about.

MY GO TO MEALS

1. Tacos are always a hit and so easy to make, it's almost like not cooking at all. We buy Taco Bell brand shells because they are all natural. Taco Salad is similar to Tacos, but I mix everything together and add Thousand Island dressing to the salad. It's quick – can be made in less than 15 minutes!
2. French Bread Pizza is amazing and only takes a few minutes to prepare. 15 minutes in the oven and you're ready to eat! Serve with a tossed salad.
3. Spaghetti is always a favorite. We had it today for lunch. I usually buy organic Classico jarred sauces and saute some veggies to add to the sauce. If I'm in a real hurry {like when I'm trying to get out the door for choir practice} I'll cook up a pot of angel hair and just add some jarred alfredo sauce or pesto sauce. Serve with steamed broccoli or a tossed salad and a loaf of bakery bread or homemade bread if you have it on hand.
4. Trader Joe's Palak Paneer with rice is one of our absolute favorites. We buy the frozen Palak Paneer from Trader Joe's and heat it up in the microwave and serve with Basmati rice. This is one of those meals we eat after a long day at the ice rink.
5. Trader Joe's Tiki Masala – again this is one of those AH-MAZING frozen dishes from Trader Joe's that we often eat after a long day when everyone is tired and just wants a yummy meal. Serve with Basmati rice and you're good to go.
6. Progresso Artisan Tomato and Roasted Red Pepper Soup with a grilled cheese sandwich or crusty bread. We've been buying this soup by the case at one of our local favorite salvage stores 3 for a \$1.00!

7. Chili Mac. So, my husband isn't crazy about this, but I love it and the kids do too, so I usually make it when he's not home and I'm needing something quick! Basically you just boil some elbow macaroni noodles and serve with your favorite chili. We like Chili Man Chili and Meatless Select Chili.

8. Taco Soup in the Crockpot is delicious, easy to prepare and is waiting for you when you get home. I like to serve it with my famous cornbread and maybe some sour cream and shredded cheese. Other crock pot favorites are Enchiladas, Potato Soup, and Bean Soup.

9. Earth Fare Market is my other go-to place for prepared meals. At least one day a week we drive 2 1/2 hours one way to Knoxville so my daughter Hannah can ice skate for eight hours. We are typically gone from home about 14 hours. It's a long day. I try hard to pack delicious and healthy lunches and food for our supper to save money, but sometimes I just run out of time and/or ideas! Earth Fare is right around the corner {within walking distance} of the ice rink. It's a great excuse for me to get more steps in and pick up supper.

10. And finally, whenever I am able, I like to make meals ahead – like on a Sunday afternoon and stick them in the freezer. Especially for breakfast.

THE ULTIMATE LIST OF THEMED DINNER NIGHTS

I love meal planning almost as much as I love finding new and unique recipes for my family to try. Being creative and planning a themed dinner takes my love for unique recipes to the next level! Themed dinner nights keep eating at home exciting and keep you from caving to the desire to eat out instead.

**"THEMED
DINNER NIGHTS
MAKE MEAL
PLANNING A
BREEZE."**

There are so many ways you can use themed dinner nights to make mealtimes more fun, which is why I've put together the ultimate list of themed dinners to help you get started. This list of themed dinner nights goes way past Taco Tuesday!

What's so great about a Themed Dinner Night? Well, when meal planning and trying to come up with a menu, you immediately have a spring board for lots of great – and fun – ideas.

**"WHAT YOU EAT
ISN'T AS IMPORTANT
AS THE PEOPLE YOU
SHARE YOUR FOOD
WITH."**



No more struggling to think of meal ideas. And, your family will look forward to meals at home every night!

Plus, you'll save a lot of money eating delicious food at home. Craving Chinese Takeout? Pull out your favorite Lo Mein recipe instead.

COME UP WITH A THEME FOR EACH NIGHT.

If you're already planning your meals according to each day of the week, then a theme night is a way to take your meal plans up a notch. Most of the themes will allow for a lot of variety, making it easy to reuse the same themes over again in the following weeks. Start your themed dinner planning by picking a unique theme for each night. This will also help keep you accountable since you will have a set plan each night.

USE THEMED NIGHTS FOR SPECIAL OCCASION MEALS.

Eating dinner in every night can start to get dull if you're eating the same meals over and over again. You can use themed dinners to add a little something special every now and then instead of every week if you don't want to do it every week. Use them on birthdays, anniversaries, or milestones to make them just a little bit special. If you use them sparingly, you could even add a little extra fun to your themed dinners by adding extra decorations or activities that go with your theme.

25 IDEAS FOR THEMED DINNERS.

The possibilities are endless when it comes to themed dinners. They can add an extra motivating factor to keep you from eating out, or be used as a way to mark special occasions. Here are a few great themed dinner ideas to get you started!

- Mexican Mondays
- Meatless Monday
- Make it Together Monday
- Taco Tuesday
- Try it Tuesday
- Throwback Thursday (favorite childhood meals)
- Thrifty Thursday
- Festival Fridays
- Fried Friday
- Sandwich Saturday
- Spaghetti Sunday
- Italian Night
- Pasta Night
- Sushi Night
- Bean Soup and Cornbread
- Chinese “Take Out” at Home
- Breakfast for Dinner
- Pizza Night
- Soup and Salad Night
- Movie Night (meal would be themed around a movie)
- Crockpot Night
- Grill Out
- Burger Night
- Event Themed (ex: circus, TV show, oscars etc)
- Leftover Night

Meal planning has endless possibilities for those who are willing to get creative. Themed meals are a great way to get the whole family excited about eating in, while saving money.

HOW TO BUILD A RECIPE BANK

Meal planning is one of my favorite ways to stay on top of things and planning my menu saves my sanity when it comes to preparing my family's meals each day.

One of the most frequently asked questions when it comes to meal planning is how in world you organize all of those recipes. Between recipes from magazines, sent through email,

**"EVERY COOK
NEEDS A RECIPE
BANK TO PULL
IDEAS."**

Between recipes from magazines, sent through email, Pinterest, and cookbooks you'll likely have hundreds to choose from as well as hundreds of places to look for your next potential meal. With a recipe bank, you can easily pull out meal ideas without always digging through cookbooks. And while I have many beloved cookbooks, it can be time consuming to look for new ideas inside the pages of a book.

**"WHAT YOU EAT
ISN'T AS IMPORTANT
AS THE PEOPLE YOU
SHARE YOUR FOOD
WITH."**



Step 1: Gather ALL of your recipes

This task might take you a few hours or even a few weeks depending on how many recipes you have lying around. This includes all of those food boards on your Pinterest account and dog-eared pages of your most beloved cookbooks. The point of this exercise is to put all of your recipes in one place so you can easily see each of them. Don't start printing off all your recipes just yet, we'll talk about how to organize them further in the next step.

Step 2: Determine what format your recipe bank should be in

Now that you have all of your recipes in one place, it's time to figure out what format you should store your recipe bank in. If you have mostly magazine pages and cookbooks, a binder might be the best place to store your recipes. If you have mostly Pinterest boards or emails, a folder on your computer might be best. Whatever you decide, make sure that all your recipes end up in this format and are stored in one place.

Step 3: Categorize your recipes

Unless you are extremely new to cooking, you are going to need a way to organize all of those recipes. Start by creating sub folders or dividers to help further categorize your cooking. You can sort them by cuisine or even by course. If your family enjoys having themed dinners each night, it might be more beneficial to organize your food by cuisine than by course. Find a way to categorize your dishes that makes sense for your family and your recipes.

Step 4: Organize them by frequency

Every household has their staple meals, whether it's tacos or pizza, every house has them. Find out what your family's favorite meals are and be sure to keep that in mind when organizing your recipe bank.

You don't want these favorites to be buried within your recipe bank, so consider making a favorites section near the front. You can also organize each section by frequency to help keep track of favorites as well.

Step 5: Keep it in an easy to access location

Depending on how frequently you meal plan, you need to be able to access this recipe bank fairly often. If you have a recipe card box or a binder, make sure it is stored in a logical place that you can get to frequently. Regardless of how you have organized your recipe bank, you should be able to find it in just a few minutes.

Creating a recipe bank will help cut down the time you spend meal planning, and help you keep track of your family's favorite recipes. Having all of your recipes at your disposal will make meal plans a breeze, and you'll have an organized recipe bank as well.

FAMILY MEALTIMES ARE IMPORTANT

Family meal time should be about sharing laughter and good food with people you love. Most moms know that mealtimes are an important part of family life. Some days are really busy and it can be hard to find time to cook a delicious meal that pleases the whole family.



3 REASONS WHY FAMILY MEALTIME IS IMPORTANT

Busy schedules and families moving in opposite directions make it hard to have “family dinners.” But, with all the benefits they offer, it’s worth it to come together at the table at least a few times a week.

Research shows that having dinner as a family at least four times a week has positive effects on your child’s development.

"HAVING DINNER TOGETHER AS A FAMILY POSITIVELY IMPACTS YOUR CHILD."

Family dinners have been shown to lower the risk of obesity, substance abuse, and eating disorders.

Speaking of benefits, here are just a few that will make you want to sit down with your family tonight.

3 REASONS WHY FAMILY MEALTIMES ARE IMPORTANT

1. Conversation. Eating dinner together provides the opportunity for great conversation.

"ENJOY GOOD CONVERSATION AND LAUGHTER AROUND THE TABLE."



This time allows parents to teach healthy communication skills without the distractions of smart phones, television, and computers. By encouraging conversation with your child, you teach them how to listen and you provide them with a chance to express their own thoughts and ideas. Conversations expand your child's vocabulary and reading ability.

2. Development. The sense of security and togetherness your child feels by having family meals together helps nurture them into healthy, well-rounded adults. Regular family dinners have a positive impact on their values, motivation, and self-esteem. Research shows that children who eat dinner with their family are more likely to understand and follow the boundaries and expectations their parents set.

To make the most of your family mealtime, turn off television and mobile devices, get together at least four times a week, encourage positive conversation, and spend at least an hour together eating, having conversation, and cleaning up together.

3. Nutrition. Eating together also encourages healthy eating habits and provides a tradition for your child to carry with them into adulthood. Research shows that family dinners increase the consumption of fruits and vegetables. Families who eat together also tend to eat fewer fried foods and drink less soda. And the frequency of family meal time is linked to the intake of protein, calcium, and vitamins.

To provide the most nutritional benefits, cook together as a family and include everyone in the preparation, experiment with fun recipes, and remake your favorite old recipes with healthier alternatives. You might also enjoy having "theme" cuisine nights like Italian or Mexican. Know your child's favorite meals and cook them on a regular basis so they'll enjoy their time at the table. You can even encourage your child to create their own recipes.

Regular family meals may require a little effort to plan, but the benefits in mental and physical health to are more than worth it.

3 TIPS FOR MAKING MEALTIME MEMORIES



My kids are growing up so fast! Between music lessons, ice skating lessons, homeschooling our weeks are filled to the brim with things to do. The one constant in every single day is that we have to eat. And since we have to eat, I want to eat good food. Like every day.

I want my kids to remember eating good food at home. And I want them to cherish memories of us sitting at the table together enjoying a delicious meal and fellowship together.

3 TIPS FOR MAKING MEALTIME MEMORIES

1. Turn off the TV, phone, iPod, and computer. Memories are made easier when family members are not distracted. So many families are experiencing a disconnect from each other because of their connection to the online world. Mealtimes should be sacred family time. Guard that time by setting boundaries and simple rules. Sit together at the table.

2. Enjoy good conversation. Keep the conversation lighthearted and uplifting. Dinner time isn't the time to talk about stressful things. Don't use the time to reprimand your children or bring up tense subjects. Your family might even enjoy using a family devotion or discussion starter to get meaningful conversation going!

3. Keep it simple. Mealtime doesn't have to be difficult to pull together to be memorable. There are days when I feed my family on paper plates. Not everyday but it does happen. And just because we sit at the table together doesn't mean I have to "set the table."

Most of the time I call my family to come eat and they fix their plates in the kitchen and bring them into the dining room {or our dining area in the family room} to eat.

Simple also means that sometimes I serve my family prepared foods - we especially love foods from Trader Joe's!

You see, it's not the amount of time you spend cooking the perfect recipe or the flair with which you set the table. It's your smile along with comforting food that will mean the most to your family.

Family is what it's really all about.



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MEAL PLANNING MADE EASY

Busy schedules and family members often moving in the opposite direction make it hard to have “family dinners.” But, with all the benefits they offer, it’s worth it to come together at the table at least a few times a week.

Meal planning helps you make the most of the time you do have so that you can enjoy good food together with the ones you love - in less time and with less stress. Easy Meal Planning gives you all the tips and tricks you need to know to get your meals planned - fast!

A photograph of a white bowl filled with a variety of fresh fruits, including strawberries, raspberries, blueberries, blackberries, and slices of orange and kiwi. The bowl is placed on a stack of books. In the background, there is a white rotary telephone, a small potted plant, and a desk lamp.

Melissa Ringstaff has been blogging at A Virtuous Woman since 2001. She's a busy pastor's wife and homeschooling mom living in the beautiful Appalachian Mountains of Southeastern KY. Her greatest joy is raising her family and helping women find peace and calm where chaos used to reign.

Melissa believes in finding freedom from perfection and living life with purpose. That's why she created the Purpose 31 Planners for Christian women.