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Food & Friends' **Cooking for Health Energy and Wellness (CHEW)** cooking classes have moved online! Learn basic principles of nutrition and cooking skills straight from our registered and licensed dietitians. We'll cover common and not-so-common food items, showcase different methods of food preparation and help you build confidence in the kitchen.

Meal Planning

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Have you ever left for work in the morning with every intention of cooking a homemade meal only to find yourself after a busy day driving up to your favorite fast food restaurant? Or what about getting home from work only to discover you forgot to pull the chicken out of the freezer in the morning and next thing you know you're ordering pizza?

Sound familiar? We all know that cooking meals at home is healthier than eating take-out. But our never ending to-do lists and busy schedules can make it seem like an impossible task. Learning to meal plan is a helpful tool in accomplishing this goal and just by setting aside a little bit of time every week, you can make this daunting task a possibility.

So what is meal planning? Meal planning is the act of planning your meals that will be eaten over the next few days to weeks. It's asking the question: "What's for dinner?" one time per week instead of every day.



Not only will meal planning reduce dinner time stress, people who eat meals at home have overall healthier diets. People who plan and cook meals at home end up eating more fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and fewer calories and sodium.

In addition to eating healthier and saving time, meal planning can help your wallet too. Making meals at home cost much less than eating take-out. And since you're planning out your meals,

you'll waste less food, meaning you're less likely to forget about that celery going limp in the fridge.

So how do you get started? We can break meal planning down to 3 simple steps: choosing recipes, grocery shopping, and meal prepping.

Step 1: Select your recipes

Set aside time every week to plan out your schedule for the following week and choose recipes accordingly. Will there be an evening that you get home late or have an appointment or errands to run?

Once you have an idea of your schedule, select meals and recipes. Maybe pick a one pot meal on a busier night and save the more time consuming recipe for a night that you know you'll have more time. To prevent feeling overwhelmed, it's a good idea to only pick 1-2 new recipes per week.

When picking recipes for balanced meals, look for recipes that have at least 2-3 food groups included. Basing meals on fresh fruits and vegetables is a great start to making a healthy meal. To do this, focus on including 1-2 servings of fruits and vegetables at every meal. A serving of cooked vegetables or fresh fruit equals $\frac{1}{2}$ cup and for leafy greens like spinach and lettuce a serving = 1 cup.



When deciding on starches, try to choose whole grain and high fiber options such as brown rice, whole wheat pasta, or corn. When choosing protein, focus on a variety of different proteins like plant-based beans and lentils along with lean animal protein like chicken and fish.

Step 2: Shop for your ingredients

Now that you've picked out your recipes for the following week, it's time to make a grocery list. Once your shopping list is complete, you can now shop your pantry at home. Search your pantry, fridge, and freezer to see what items you already have. Cross off items that you have at home to prevent buying duplicates at the store.

Step 3: Prepping your ingredients

There are two ways to go about preparing your meals. The first way is to prep all of your meals on one day and store them in the fridge to eat later. This can be done by picking 1-2 recipes and making multiple servings to enjoy later. Prepping everything ahead of time works best for 1-2 people versus a large family since fridge space can become an issue. You also have to not mind eating the same meals over the course of the week.



The second way to meal prep is to set aside a few hours to start prepping parts of your meals. If 3 of your recipes call for chopped onion, you can chop them all ahead of time. You can save time by washing any produce and cooking grains like brown rice or lentils ahead of time to reduce the amount of time cooking the night of. This type of prep may work best for larger families or if you like to have a variety of different meals during the week.

And that's it! Although meal planning and prepping sounds intimidating, it can be worked into anyone's schedule. Starting slow can help prevent feeling overwhelmed – start by only planning meals for 1-2 nights when just beginning. Having a “plan b” dinner idea will also help when your schedule doesn't go as planned.

This recipe below is a great way to use up staple pantry items. It can be frozen into individual containers to be pulled out and defrosted in time for dinner.

Questions? Contact Ashley Hayslip, Food & Friends Community Dietitian at ahayslip@foodandfriends.org or (202) 269-6879.

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FOOD & FRIENDS®

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Pantry Curried Lentil Soup



Ingredients

- 2 Tbsp. oil (any neutral oil works like canola oil)
- 1 Tbsp. each of cumin powder, coriander powder and turmeric powder (can sub 3 Tbsp. curry powder)
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 Tbsp. grated ginger (can sub 1 Tbsp. ground ginger)
- 1 (28-oz) can crushed tomatoes
- 1 cup dried brown lentils
- 4 cups chicken or vegetable broth
- 1 (15-oz) can coconut milk (can sub 1 cup plain yogurt)
- 2 tsp salt
- Optional: 1 tsp cayenne powder
- Optional: Handful fresh or frozen spinach

Prep Time:

1 hour

Keep in Fridge:

Up to 5 days

Keep in Freezer:

Up to 3 months

Directions

1. Heat oil in a large soup pot. Add cumin and coriander powders (or curry powder) and sauté for 30 seconds. Add garlic and sauté for 1 minute.
2. Add can of tomatoes, ginger, turmeric (if not using curry powder) and salt to pot and cook for 5 minutes.
3. Add lentils, cayenne powder (if using) and 4 cups of broth (or water) and bring to a boil. Reduce heat to low, cover the pot, and simmer for 35-40 minutes until lentils are tender. Be sure to stir the pot a few times during cooking to prevent lentils from sticking to the bottom of the pot.
4. Once lentils are soft, stir in coconut milk (or yogurt if using) and spinach (if using) until heated through.



Recipe adapted from www.theendlessmeal.com