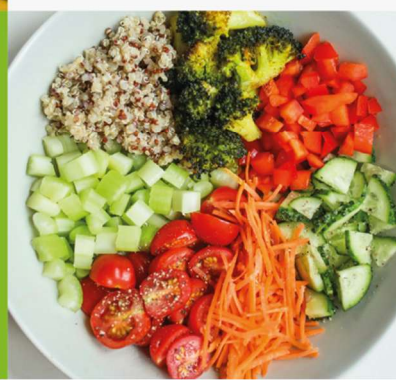# Meal planning

Health

Wellness

Nutrition

Support

Introduction

Many of the challenges we face in trying to eat more healthily arise from the amount of processed, packaged foods that we buy each week, often for the sake of convenience.

By planning ahead, however, you can reduce your reliance on processed foods, save money, and improve the quality of your diet.

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Meal planning

Meal planning can feel like a big effort at first and might be very time consuming. However, spending some time thinking ahead will save you a lot of time (and hopefully money) later on, especially as you get used to planning and thinking about what needs to be added to your shopping list.

With some planning, walking into the kitchen after a long day will be much less stressful when you know what you are going to cook and that you have everything you need.

As you follow our tips, make your own notes to help get you started. Remember, you are changing your routine to something new, and it can take time for this to become familiar and comfortable. Take it slow and make small changes that build to something bigger.

Cooking meals at home from fresh, frozen, tinned or packaged ingredients is usually healthier and cheaper than buying pre-packaged foods and takeaways. So, as well as benefitting your health, planning ahead can also be good for your pocket.

Make sure you think about your whole day, including breakfast, lunch, dinner and snacks. If you're not the one who does the most cooking in your household, ask the person who usually makes the meals to get involved in this task with you. As well as thinking about the food you need, think about what you have at home to chop, mix, stir and cook the foods effectively.

Be flexible with your planning

Having a family meal planner can help you think about what each member of the family has to eat each night. Make a note of any days that are particularly busy and when it might be difficult to find time to cook. You know that meals for these days need to be quick and easy, so think about how you can accomplish this.

Include your household favourites

Ask everyone in your household their favourite foods and meals. Think about how long they take to make and if you have enough time to do this. On a busy night, keep to a recipe that is quick and easy. You do not need to have a completely new plan each week. Swap family favourites in and out so that they appear every week or two. This can be even more important with children, who often ask for limited variety.

Set yourself a routine

Pick one day a week for meal planning and set time aside. Take time to plan your meals for the following week and write your shopping list. Do your weekly shop on another day, and set aside a third day for batch cooking if you have a freezer. Record the days on your planner for each week.

Use ingredients you've already bought

When choosing your recipes for the week, think about what ingredients you already have in the kitchen that you could use or need using up. Can you make a meal from what you already have?

Check your cupboards, make a note of the ingredients... can this make a meal? Food waste will add to the cost of your week, so make sure to use all the food you have before it goes off.

Ease yourself into change

Changing everything all at once can be daunting. So, instead of meal planning your whole week right from the start, tell yourself you will give it a go for a month and pick one meal of the day to plan for. After that, review your progress and choose the next meal to adapt. Record your goal for the next month of meal planning.

Taking the pressure off yourself will make it much easier. Remember to make your goal specific and set a timeframe in which to achieve it.

Use a variety of ingredients

Make sure to make a variety of different meals across the week so that your diet doesn't become repetitive. You could alternate between meat, chicken, fish or vegetables; pasta, noodle or rice dishes; soups; stews, curries etc. Mix it up and keep it interesting.

Make friends with your freezer

The freezer is the perfect place to keep leftovers for another day. Always freeze on the day of preparation, and make sure the items are dated. Most items can be stored in the freezer for a month or two.

Remember, many fruit and vegetable ingredients can be bought frozen and this can be a good way of reducing food waste.

Important: NEVER refreeze defrosted raw meat. You will need to cook it before you can freeze again to eat later.

Create a habit of batch cooking

If you can free up an hour or two to get a head start for the week, try cooking a recipe in bulk. You can batch cook stews, casseroles or sauces and freeze them in portions. This can then be a quick, easy meal to enjoy on a busy day.

Tip: Add some storage tubs or food bags to your shopping list!

Have a backup plan

If you are late home and you really do not have time to cook the dish you were planning, take something homemade out of the freezer, or make a quick and easy meal from in the ingredients you have in. Remember to cook the meal you skipped on your planner the next night, so you do not waste the ingredients.

Final thought

They say that if you fail to plan then you plan to fail, and planning ahead can also help us achieve our goals when it comes to healthy eating.

However, remember not to attempt everything in one go, otherwise it could be overwhelming. Instead, follow the tips above one at a time. Pick which area you want to try first and come back to this resource once you are ready to try the next one. Think of healthy eating as a long-term project rather than a quick fix.

If you would like to learn more or require more information and support, please get in touch!

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