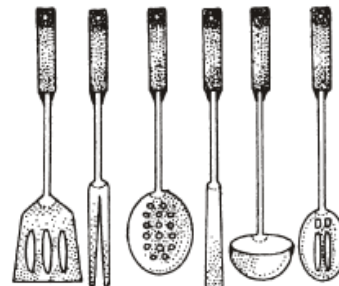


*Course Contents:*

- *Mealtime – keep it simple, keep it fun, just keep it!*
- *Meal planning ideas to simplify your life.*
- *How to eat well with no time and no money.*
- *The importance of 5 a Day.*
- *Loving leftovers.*
- *Food safety and freezer storage.*



**Enjoying the Family Meal**

Family meals are important. You create special bonds and lifelong memories around the family table. Family meals can teach your child about healthful eating. You just need to be a good role model. When you try new foods your child may be more adventurous with food, too. Try these easy ways to make family meals a pleasant part of your family routine:

- **Set a regular family mealtime.** Regular mealtimes give your child a better chance to eat a variety of foods to get the right amount to grow, stay healthy, and keep a healthy weight.
- **Make it simple, make it quick!** Spend less time in the kitchen and more time at the family table. Simple meals, even cold sandwiches, taste as good as meals that take more work. You can make any meal special if you all feel relaxed and if mealtime is filled with caring and laughter. Simplify – to take care of you, too!
- **Show that family meals are important.** During mealtime, turn off the TV. Find another way to see favorite shows. Let the answering machine take your phone calls, too. Have your family make calls before or after the meal hour. Show that same respect for other families when you make phone calls.
- **Eat around a table.** It's easier to talk and listen to your family when you face each other. Eating side by side at the kitchen counter takes away eye contact.
- **Enjoy meal talk.** Make easy conversations – no nagging or complaining. Talk so everyone can be a “star” at mealtime. Don’t take over. Your child will listen and learn by feeling included.
- **Be realistic about mealtime.** Try to sit down together. Keep meals from lasting too long. If kids get fussy, your family meal won’t be fun. Wait until everyone is done to be excused.

**Why Eat Together?**

**Nutrition:** Studies show that most people – children, teens, older adults and singles – eat more balanced meals and a wider variety of foods when they eat with family or friends.

**Family Tradition:** Food served at the family table helps shape and give lasting meaning to our cultural heritage. Positive food memories created during childhood are cherished for life.

**Communication:** Shared mealtimes offer a chance to communicate with neighbors, friends and family; helping to build a strong spirit of community and commitment to one another.

**Culinary Skills:** Children learn basic cooking skills and to appreciate a variety of tasty foods when they are involved in mealtime preparation.

## Getting to the Table

Few would argue about the importance of family meals. But when reality strikes, any number of obstacles can get in the way of dishing up dinner.



### 1. Work, Sports or Other Commitments

- Be flexible with the time of meals. If children have after school activities, plan a late dinner or have breakfast together instead.
- Be creative with where you place your plates. If you can't all be at home together, know that dinner doesn't always have to be on the kitchen table. Spread a blanket at the soccer field or have a "tailgate dinner" in your car.

### 2. Everyone's Taste Buds are Different

- Get kids involved. Good kitchen helpers usually make good food tasters. Children learn best by doing, not watching.
- Let every eater plan a day's menu. Rotate meal planning to satisfy everyone's taste buds.

### 3. Too Tired to Plan, Shop and Cook

- Keep mealtime simple and easy. Dinner during the week should be nutritious, but quick. Save the complicated meals for when you have more time.
- Share the responsibility. Let one person shop, another cook - and don't forget the cleanup committee.
- Stock your pantry and freezer once a month with some quick to fix staples to dish up anytime, anywhere.
- Make a list of quick family favorites to keep on hand for those extra hectic times.

### 4. Don't Enjoy Cooking

- Have a potluck with neighbors or friends to share the cooking duties ... and the fun.
- Maybe there's a budding chef in your house. Find out where family member's talents and interests lie.
- Try a new recipe or buy a new cookbook to spark your interest in cooking. Remember, even Julia Child had to learn to cook at some time.

## Simplify Your Life: Meal Planning Ideas

When your life seems crazy because you have too much to do and too many things to deal with, it is hard to find time for things like a sit-down family dinner. Today so many people feel overworked, over-scheduled and over-frazzled that it is no surprise that we prepare meals and dine at home less often. And, eating more meals at home is a worthy goal since they tend to be cheaper and healthier.

So how do you get started? By **setting aside time to plan weekly meals**, you can avoid standing in line during last minute trips to the supermarket and relax knowing that your kitchen is well-stocked with healthful foods for quick and easy meals.

First, **get ideas from family members**. They'll be more likely to eat what is prepared and it will be easier to get help with the meal preparation and clean up process if their food preferences are considered.

Next, **make a list** of all the main dishes you normally fix, favorite dishes of family members as well as foods that you would like to serve but often omit due to time constraints or missing ingredients. List the ingredients that you will need to prepare these meals using a shopping list. Ask yourself what obstacles this list points out: do you need a simpler recipe for tuna casserole or a quicker way to make lasagna? Would using frozen and canned foods such as frozen broccoli or canned tomatoes or beans, make the meal easier to prepare? Search for quick and easy recipes.

**Add staples to your list.** Having a well-stocked pantry makes it easier to create quick and delicious family meals. Remember, the food you have on hand will determine how healthfully you eat, so choose wisely.

Now, **check pantry and refrigerator contents** and take your list to the store, where you will buy your items all at once and avoid panicked, last minutes trips to the supermarket later in the week.

### More Plan-Ahead Tips

Once you've gotten the meal plan, here are some other tips that can help make your life simpler:



- **Look ahead for extra-busy days and plan something quick** for them: cold cut subs, chicken sandwich, omelets, soup and grilled quesadillas.
- **Weekly trips to the supermarket** will ensure that you have healthy foods. Before you go, plan your shopping lists so you buy what you need. Decide on at least three entrees for the week ahead, such as grilled chicken, spaghetti or baked pork chops.
- **During the week, plan simpler meals:** one-pot meals, broiled or roasted meats, steamed vegetables, salads, fresh fruit desserts. Save sauces and multi-step meals for weekends.
- **Make twice as much** of whatever you are cooking and freeze half. It doesn't take much more time or energy to make two batches of lasagna, a bigger pot of chili, or a huge pan of tuna casserole and later, all you'll have to do is thaw, heat, and serve. In addition to our double duty meals try these tips:
  - Browning ground beef for dinner? Do extra, to use in tacos later in the week.
  - Baking chicken breasts? Cook two more, and then cut up later for stir-fry with vegetables and brown rice.
  - Cook extra rice, put into a container, and refrigerate or freeze. On a busy night, microwave it, stirring occasionally, until heated through, then use as you would fresh.
  - Chop a whole onion, even if you only need part of it right now. Store or freeze the rest for another recipe in a zippered plastic freezer bag.
  - Grate extra cheese and store it in a zippered plastic bag in the freezer.

### Fast, Healthy Techniques

Following are specific tips and information on quick, healthy food preparation methods. You'll notice that all these techniques not only save time, but don't require a lot of added fat.

**Stir-frying** - Years ago, when stir-frying became popular in American kitchens, millions of people rushed out to buy woks. All you really need, however, is a good cast-iron or non-stick skillet – and a light touch when it comes to adding oil. In fact, many wonderful stir-fry dishes can be made using less than a tablespoon of added oil! (Tip: Heat pan before you add the oil; it goes farther this way.) Though stir-frying is known for being a quick way to cook, the preparation – all that slicing and dicing – can take quite a bit of time. So take a shortcut! Simply buy your vegetables precut from the produce section (remember these will have some nutrient loss from the advance slicing) or frozen food section. When you're really rushed, you can even get cleaned shrimp or precut cubes of chicken or beef.





**Microwaving** - The microwave is truly one of your best friends when it comes to cutting fat. The secret is to use bouillon, wine or broths instead of added fat to cook in flavor and tenderness. Because the microwave cooks foods so quickly, many of the nutrients are retained. Be creative with herbs, too – they add flavor, without fat or calories. Remember that your microwave is also a great time saver when it comes to thawing frozen foods.

No discussion of quick cooking and the microwave would be complete without touching on the frozen dinners many of us “nuke” when we’re in a hurry.

The nutritional value of these depends on which dinner you choose, and whether or not you serve extra fruits or vegetables with your selection. Read labels carefully; choose one of the new brands that are low in fat, calories and sodium, and enhance your dinner with additional fruits, vegetables or whole grains.

**Broiling and Baking** - Fat content can be reduced by broiling and baking on a rack to let accumulated fats drain away from the food.

**Slow Cookers** - What could be better than having dinner ready and waiting when you get home? With a slow cooker, which cooks food slowly at low temperatures, soups, stews and even pot roasts are a breeze. Simply place chopped vegetables, meat and liquid in the slow cooker in the morning and leave on a “low” setting; eight effortless hours later, your one-dish meal is done. Check your cookbook or owner’s manual for proper preparation and safety instructions. Also, go to the “Cold Weather Cooking - Using Your Slow Cooker” Click and Learn Course for recipes and lots of helpful hints.

**Steaming** - Whether you prefer to steam in a microwave or on the stove top, the benefits are the same – you’re conserving nutrients and preserving flavor, while adding little or no extra fat.

**Pressure Cooking** - Pressure cookers do their fast work using steam – so it’s possible to cook a pound of potatoes in only four minutes, or a flavorful chicken stew in less than a half hour. Plus, with a pressure cooker you can convert even the most inexpensive, tough cut of meat into a delectable main course.

## Break Your Fast in Minutes Flat

Though breakfast is one of the most important meals of the day, it needn’t be a time-consuming ordeal. Whole grains, fruit and low-fat dairy products can provide the energy you need to last you until lunchtime. Try these simple suggestions:

- Pull out a homemade waffle from your freezer, pop it in the toaster, and top it with peanut butter.
- Microwave two large shredded wheat biscuits with some skim milk and cinnamon for an instant hot breakfast. Quick-cooking oatmeal works well in the microwave also.
- Pick up a fresh-baked, low-fat, whole-grain muffin and a half-pint of skim or low-fat milk on your way to the office.
- Try low or non-fat yogurt with fresh or dried fruit mixed in. Vanilla yogurt mixed with sliced bananas, whole-grain cereal nuggets, and a dash of cinnamon is delicious. Or, try plain yogurt with apples and raisins; lemon yogurt with berries and/or melon.
- Top bagels or toast with low-fat spreads such as part-skim ricotta cheese, low-fat cottage cheese and cinnamon, apple butter, or jelly to help you avoid the mid-morning munchies.
- Top a slice of whole-grain bread with moderate amounts of sliced turkey and low-fat cheese and place in toaster oven until it begins to melt. Delicious – and so easy!
- Many busy people love blender breakfasts – those that combine milk, fruit and occasionally yogurt for a quick, frothy day starter. Blend your favorite chopped fruit with skim milk or plain low-fat

yogurt. Pour into a paper cup or travel mug and, with toast or a muffin, this breakfast travels well and offers the balance you need.

- If you like fresh pancakes, waffles or muffins in the morning, prepare two bowls the night before – one with the dry ingredients, one with the liquid ingredients (refrigerated). The next morning, just blend together and cook.
- One of the most enduring and popular breakfast items is cold cereal; paired with skim milk and fresh fruit, it makes a great meal. By selecting a whole grain cereal, you'll boost your fiber intake, too.

## Lunch on the Run

Whether you and your family take a brown bag to work or school, or you all eat at home, lunchtime can be a satisfying meal that meets both your time and nutritional requirements. Sandwiches, of course, are an obvious, time-honored choice for packed lunches. But if your sandwiches have become a bit boring, try some new variations. Here are some ideas:



- Try roast turkey or chicken, with different types of mustard instead of mayonnaise.
- Cook extra roast beef or lean meatloaf and use the leftovers for great sandwiches.
- Try low-fat cottage cheese with raisins and chopped apples or pears, sprinkled with cinnamon, as a sandwich filling.
- Vary the bread you use. Try pita bread, a whole-wheat English muffin or bagel, or even cornbread.
- Remember that you don't need to have a cooler to keep your lunch safely refrigerated; a frozen can of juice will do the job perfectly. By the time noon rolls around, your juice will be thawed and your lunch still chilled.
- Top low-fat cheese pizza with your favorite fresh vegetables, such as tomatoes, green pepper, broccoli, onion, or grated carrots.
- Bake potatoes in the microwave. They take only 4-10 minutes, depending on how many you cook at once. Top with low-fat cheese, salsa, leftover vegetables like broccoli, or chili for a change of pace.
- Don't forget leftovers. Leftover pasta or rice? Toss together with some fresh vegetables, a few ounces of canned chicken or tuna, or cubes of low-fat cheese and a low-fat salad dressing. Combine leftover salad with cubes of low-fat cheese or tuna chunks and a bit of reduced-fat dressing. Scoop into a whole wheat pita pocket for a sandwich with crunch. Or, use as a main dish salad to munch with whole grain crackers or bread sticks. Leftover chicken? Chop it up, mix with low-fat mayonnaise or yogurt, and add chopped fruit and/or vegetables. Use as a salad or sandwich filling. Try apples, grapes, raisins, pineapple, celery, carrots, cucumber, radishes or zucchini in your chicken salad.

Balance these combinations with skim or low-fat milk, extra fresh vegetables and fruit, and your meal is complete.

## Timesaving Dinners With a Healthy Twist



“Quick” needn’t be boring. Indeed, by focusing on foods that cook quickly (like pasta, boneless chicken, beef and fish fillets, and fresh vegetables), it’s possible to turn out a delicious, gourmet meal in less than half an hour – even after a long, tiring day at work. Leftovers, too, can be used creatively for an easy, quick meal.

First, consult your menu. If you’re going to cook chicken on Tuesday, pull it out of the freezer on Monday night and let it thaw in your refrigerator. (If you forget, no problem: just pop it in the microwave on the lowest setting for about 20 minutes, and unwind or take care of other household chores while the minutes tick away.) It’s all in the timing. Don’t eliminate nutritious foods that take a little longer to cook. While these foods cook, prepare other parts of the meal, or just relax.

Try simple variations. Changing the same old standard makes planning uncomplicated and simple dishes take on fresh pizzazz. Here are some quick, nutritious variations on the basics.

- Rice or couscous – add dried fruit, or celery, scallions or mushrooms to the basic recipe. Or, cook with a bit of low-sodium bouillon or cinnamon.
- Vegetables – Add a bit of orange rind while they cook. Or, add salsa or a drizzle of lemon or lime juice before serving.
- Poultry – Bake or microwave as usual, but with mustard and herbs, no-salt-added tomato puree and herbs, or salsa on top. Poach in orange or tomato juice, or low-sodium chicken bouillon with a dash of thyme or cinnamon. If microwaving chicken, follow directions carefully and check the temperature to be sure it’s fully cooked.
- Fish – For a Mexican touch, spread with plain low-fat yogurt and top with salsa before cooking. Or, try any of the above suggestions for poultry.
- Salads – Vary salads by using different in-season vegetables – and lots of them! Occasionally make a no-lettuce vegetable salad, using thawed frozen veggies if necessary. Try adding various types of cooked legumes (beans and lentils); if using canned versions, pour them into a strainer and rinse for best flavor and to reduce sodium content. Experiment with different flavored vinegars (balsamic, raspberry or herbs, for example) as a dressing. To make salads quickly, do the work in advance. Wash a few day’s to a week’s work of lettuce at a time. Spin or pat dry and store in plastic bags in the refrigerator.

Use leftovers wisely. Leftovers from the Sunday roast chicken can make a wonderful casserole or stir-fry the next day. Saturday night chili becomes a great topper to a Tuesday taco salad or a baked potato. Leftover pork roast is delicious cubed and thrown together with vegetables for an easy stew.

Organize your cooking. Don’t try to cook your meal one dish at a time. Take a moment before you start to make a game plan: first, start the dish that needs to cook or marinate the longest; chop vegetables while pasta or meat cooks. A good plan uses your time efficiently and gets the whole meal prepared at the same time.

These are just a few ideas. When you get into the habit of using them, you’ll come up with ideas on your own, too. Cooking can be fun, healthy and fast – and, who knows? You may well wind up with extra minutes to spend on activities you like even more!



## Convenience Cooking — How to Make Quick and Tasty Meals from a Box



Boxed rice and grain mixes – like Spanish rice or chicken-flavored noodles – have been part of American cooking for years, usually as a quick side dish. But with a few extra ingredients and a couple of extra minutes, you can turn these convenience products into a healthy, satisfying meal. And there's just one pot to wash!

Boxed grain mixes are convenient, but many need help nutritionally. Some simple choices at the store and at home, however, can ensure a fast and healthy meal. When possible, opt for nutrient-rich, whole grain mixes. Those that contain brown rice, kasha (roasted buckwheat), barley, quinoa, whole wheat couscous and wild rice are great choices. Today's supermarket shelves are teeming with new and exotic varieties.

When cooking with convenience foods, sodium can add up fast. If a box mix includes a seasoning packet, you can usually use half or maybe less. (There will still be plenty of flavor.) Or skip the seasoning packet and create your own mix of herbs and spices. If you are adding canned beans to the meal, rinse them well. Try canned vegetables with no added salt. And use lemons and limes – both the juice and the zest – for a burst of fresh flavor.

Finally, consider the fat. If a box mix calls for butter or margarine, substitute healthier oils like olive or canola. You can also use less fat than recommended.

Any combination from the following list of foods can turn a boxed grain mix into a delicious, healthy meal. Be sure to use a generous amount of vegetables and a source of protein like chicken, beans, cheese, or nuts. Keep in mind the proportions of a healthy meal: two-thirds (or more) vegetables, fruits, whole grains and beans, and one-third (or less) lean meat and low-fat dairy.

With the exception of vegetables and cheese, you can include the most ingredients at the beginning of cooking. Add vegetables during the last few minutes to ensure a crisp texture (and maximum nutrient retention). Add cheese just before serving.

Choose from these ingredients to add punch to your tasty meals from a box:

- **Fresh, frozen and canned vegetables:** save time with precut fresh vegetables from the salad bar or from the produce aisle
- **Canned tomatoes:** excellent source of cancer-fighting lycopene
- **Precooked chicken and turkey:** without skin, trimmed of fat
- **Canned beans:** rinse thoroughly under running water
- **Canned salmon and tuna:** packed in water, not oil
- **Leftover beef and pork tenderloin:** trimmed of fat
- **Cheese:** reduced-fat varieties, or small amounts of strong tasting cheeses like Parmesan, feta or sharp cheddar
- **Nuts:** walnuts, peanuts, pecans, almonds, pine nuts
- **Dried fruits:** apricots, cranberries, dates, raisins
- **Fresh herbs:** basil, cilantro, dill, rosemary, parsley, chives
- **Dried herbs and spices:** oregano, thyme, bay leaves, curry powder, chili powder, cumin, coriander

## Get Moving Towards Better Health with 5 a Day

Good News! Nutrition experts want you to eat more – fruits and vegetables, that is. Did you know that Americans are 10 times more likely to choose a soft drink instead of 100% juice? And, Americans are 4 times more likely to pick a processed food for a snack instead of a fruit or vegetable?



Along with diets that are rich in whole grains, fruits and vegetables help promote good health. Unfortunately most Americans aren't getting the fruits and vegetables they need. Keep reading to learn how you can increase your intake of fruits and vegetables.

What is 5 A Day? 5 A Day is a national campaign to get Americans to eat at least 5 servings of fruits and vegetables each day.

What is so nutritious about fruits and vegetables? Fruits and vegetables are packed with dietary fiber and vitamins A and C. They are also a source of unique compounds called phytochemicals. Research has shown that fiber, vitamin A, vitamin C, along with phytochemicals may reduce our risk of developing chronic diseases such as heart disease and certain forms of cancer.

Five servings sounds like a lot! Not really. Each of the following is equal to 1 serving:

- 1 piece of medium-sized fruit
- ½ cup of chopped fruit
- ¼ cup dried fruit
- ¾ cup (6 ounces) of 100% juice
- ½ cup of cooked fruit or vegetable
- 1 cup of raw vegetables

Aren't fruits and vegetables expensive? Not when you look at the amount of nutrients you get compared with cookies, chips, or soda. To get the best prices on fruits and vegetables buy fruits and vegetables in season. Have a family outing and visit farmer's markets and roadside produce stands. Use unit prices to help spot the best buys on frozen or canned fruit and vegetables.

Which is better: frozen, canned, or fresh? Pick fresh produce when the price and quality are at their best. Otherwise, pick the canned or frozen varieties, which are often just as nutritious.

What kinds of fruits and vegetables should we eat? The bright colors seen in fruits and vegetables often come from the phytochemicals. To get the healthful nutrients and phytochemicals, choose a variety of colorful fruits and vegetables. The more color you include in your diet the better!

How can we get more fruits and vegetables in our diets? Follow these tips and you will be on your way to 5 A Day in no time:

- plan your meals and snacks to include fruits and vegetables
- start your day with 100% juice
- add lettuce, tomato and onions to a sandwich
- brighten up a plain salad with carrots, bell peppers, broccoli and cauliflower
- add strawberries, peaches, or bananas to your favorite breakfast cereal

## Loving Leftovers!

Stretch your food dollars with leftovers. Leftovers can make meals that are almost free! It is okay



to eat the same meal for dinner 2 days in a row. Cooking is simple on the second day. Just heat and serve! You will be spending less time in the kitchen, and you will be saving money! Be Creative — turn your leftovers into great tasting meals:

- **Better Beans** - Cook hamburger in a skillet until browned. Stir in **leftover baked beans or refried beans**. Sprinkle with shredded cheddar cheese. Serve over rice, spread on tortilla shells, or serve with corn chips.
- **Tomorrow's Tacos** - Slice **leftover chicken, steak or roast** into strips. Fry meat strips with onion and green pepper strips. Serve in tortilla shells with chopped lettuce, tomatoes and salsa.
- **Easy Hamburger and Noodles** - Brown some hamburger and diced onions in a skillet. Add a can of tomatoes and **leftover macaroni and cheese**. Heat and eat!
- **Beef or Pork Hash** - Cut **leftover beef or pork roast** into small pieces. Heat vegetable oil in a large skillet. Add meat and hash brown potatoes to skillet. Fry until browned.
- **Chicken and Biscuits** - Combine 1 to 2 cups of chopped **leftover chicken** with a can of cream of chicken soup, ½ can of water and ¼ cup shredded carrots. Spread into a casserole dish. Top with biscuits. Bake in a 350° oven until biscuits are lightly browned.
- **Stir Fried Spaghetti** - Heat olive oil in a skillet. Add **leftover spaghetti noodles** to oil and stir until warm. Add spaghetti sauce to noodles and heat. Sprinkle with parmesan cheese and serve! *Tastes better than the night before!*
- **Baked Spaghetti** - Layer **leftover spaghetti sauce, noodles**, more sauce and cheese in a casserole dish. Cover tightly and freeze. Bake in a 350° oven for 45 minutes.
- **Chicken Sandwich Spread** - Combine chopped **leftover chicken** with small amount of chopped onion, celery, salt, pepper and low-fat mayonnaise. Mix in a little pickle relish for a different flavor. Spread on bread, crackers or stuff in a pita.
- **Barbeque Sandwich** - Combine **leftover hamburger, roast beef or pork** with barbecue sauce. Heat and serve on buns.
- **Leftover meats** are a great bonus! Use **leftover chicken, beef or hamburger** to make casseroles, enchiladas, tacos, stir fries, soups, sandwiches, chili.
- **Pasta Salad** - Combine **leftover noodles** (penne, rotini, wagon wheels, macaroni) with chopped broccoli, tomatoes, olives and low-fat Italian salad dressing.
- **Ham it up!** - Freeze chopped **leftover ham**. Add to scrambled eggs, macaroni and cheese, baked potatoes, noodle and rice dishes.
- **Hamburger and Biscuits** - Break 1 to 2 cups of **leftover hamburger** into small pieces. Spread in a casserole dish. Top with a can of beefy mushroom soup, ½ water and ½ cup vegetables. Top with biscuits. Bake in a 350° oven until biscuits are lightly browned.
- **Spoonfuls of Veggies** - Freeze small amounts of **leftover vegetables**. When you are making a soup, casserole or stir fry, toss in some veggies!
- **Meat and Stuffing** - Make stovetop stuffing according to directions on box. Add small pieces of **leftover meatloaf, hamburger or chicken and cooked vegetables**.
- **Tropical Rice** - Mix **leftover rice** with crushed pineapple. Serve hot or cold.
- **Refried Rice** - Heat 2 tablespoons vegetable oil in a large skillet. Add ½ cup of shredded carrots and onions. Cook for 2 minutes. Add 2 cups of **leftover rice** and 1 beaten egg. Stir and fry for 3 minutes.
- **Twice-Baked Squash or Sweet Potatoes** - Combine **leftover mashed squash or sweet potatoes** with a small amount of margarine, maple syrup and cinnamon. Place in a casserole dish sprayed with non-stick vegetable spray. Bake in a 350° oven for 20 minutes.

## Safe Leftovers

Put leftover foods in the refrigerator as soon as possible. Bring food home from the restaurant as soon as possible. Throw away food that has been at room temperature for more than 2 hours. If the day is hot – 90° or higher – don't eat foods left out for 1 hour or more. Store leftover foods in airtight containers with lids. Use leftover foods within 3 to 4 days.

Freeze It! Don't throw away leftovers. Freeze as you go! Here are some examples of how long leftover foods will last in your freezer:

- Cooked Soups and Stews — 3 months
- Cooked Hamburger and Meatloaf — 2 to 3 months
- Cooked Meat Casseroles — 2 to 3 months
- Cooked Chicken — 4 months
- Cooked Ham Slices or Cubes — 1 to 2 months
- Cooked Pizza — 1 to 2 months

## Freezing Cooked Food for Future Meals: Freezer Bag Tips

Remember, a simple quick-cooking technique is to make extra food at one meal for future meals. Or, to prepare food ahead and freeze for enjoying at a later time. One easy method of freezing foods, including liquid foods such as soups and stews, is to freeze them in freezer bags. Following are some general freezing tips, followed by specific tips for freezing in freezer bags.

- If you're making extra food at one meal for future meals, separate and refrigerate the portion to be served later BEFORE you put the food on the table. This keeps food quality higher by preventing "planned-overs" from becoming "picked-overs." It also helps keep food safe.
- Keep an appliance thermometer in your refrigerator and in your freezer to assure they stay at 40°F or lower (refrigerator) and 0°F or lower (freezer). Buy a thermometer at a discount, hardware, grocery store or other store that sells kitchen cooking tools.
- Refrigerate perishable foods so the TOTAL time they're at room temperature is less than two hours (or one hour in temperatures above 90°F). At room temperature, just ONE bacterium in perishable foods could grow to 2,097,152 bacteria in seven hours! As a general guideline, eat perishable foods within two days or freeze them.

Perishable foods include:

- ▶ meat, poultry, fish, eggs;
  - ▶ dairy products;
  - ▶ pasta, rice, cooked vegetables;
  - ▶ fresh, peeled and/or cut fruits and vegetables.
- Freeze foods in portion sizes you'll need for future meals. For example, if there are two in your family and you each eat a cup of rice for a meal, freeze in two-cup portions.





Let's take this important food safety technique step by step:

**STEP 1.** Cool foods “slightly” at room temperature before refrigeration. It is not necessary for a food to be completely cool before it is refrigerated. To help food cool slightly before refrigeration, place a shallow container of food on a cooling rack to allow air to circulate all round the pan for about 20 to 30 minutes. Limit the depth of food to 2 inches.

**STEP 2.** Complete the cooling of foods in the refrigerator. Cool foods to refrigerator temperature before bagging them for your freezer. It is OK to refrigerate foods while they're still warm. LOOSELY cover food upon refrigeration. This allows heat to escape and protects the food from accidental contamination from other foods during cooling.

**STEP 3.** Pack foods into freezer bags. Use “freezer” bags, not “storage” bags for storing food in freezer. Freezer bags are thicker than storage bags and will keep the food fresh longer.

Speed freezing and hasten thawing by freezing foods in a thinner, flattened shape in freezer bags. A rounded shape takes longer to thaw through to the middle. Flatter packages also will stack better in your freezer.

To avoid getting food on the outside or stuck in the closure of the freezer bags, use a wide-mouth funnel (available in the kitchenware section of many stores). Place the freezer bag in a container such as a quart measuring cup. Standing the bag upright also helps if you are filling the bag with a more liquid-type food. You may wish to double-bag liquids as an added precaution against leakage. Open the top of bag and enclose the edges around the bottom of wide-mouthed funnel. Add food, in desired amount, through the funnel. Hold edges of the bag in place as needed. Or, use some type of scoop – such as a measuring cup with a handle – to transfer the food to the freezer bag.

**STEP 4.** Label foods. To avoid mystery meats and other foods of unknown age and possibly origin, label foods using freezer tape, gummed freezer labels or permanent marking pens/crayons. Include:

- name of food;
- packaging date;
- number of servings or amount

It is helpful to place filled freezer bags on a flat surface in your freezer, such as a metal pan. Do not stack freezer bags until frozen so they will freeze faster. After they are frozen solid, the bags may be removed from the pan and stored, stacked directly on the freezer shelf. Or turn them on their edge and store them vertically. This is an especially good idea when freezing liquid foods such as soups and stews.

**STEP 5.** Thaw and cook frozen foods. DO NOT thaw perishable foods at room temperature. If perishable foods are left at room temperature too long, bacteria may grow and produce heat-resistant toxins that can cause food-borne illness. Cooking may not be able to destroy these toxins.

It's best to plan ahead for slow, safe thawing in the refrigerator. Small items may thaw overnight in the refrigerator. Up to 5 pounds of food should thaw in about 24 hours. If there is the possibility a thawing package might leak, you may want to thaw it on a plate or a pan.

If food is thawed in the microwave, finish reheating it right away. Unlike food thawed in a refrigerator, microwave-thawed foods reach temperatures that encourage bacterial growth. Cook immediately to kill any bacteria that may have developed and to prevent further bacterial growth:

Food may be transferred from a freezer bag to a microwave-safe container for thawing in the microwave.

If the freezer bag manufacturer says it is OK to thaw foods directly in their freezer bag, follow manufacturer's directions for such things as venting, recommended heat settings, types of foods suitable for microwave-thawing, etc., for that specific bag. Also, follow manufacturer's directions for your microwave.

While you may be able to satisfactorily defrost food in some freezer bags in the microwave (check manufacturer's directions), DO NOT cook the food in the freezer bag – unless recommended by the microwave manufacturer. At the higher temperatures used in the microwave cooking process, it is possible for the plastic to reach melting temperatures.

**When reheating previous cooked foods, heat until steamy hot throughout (165°F).**

### **No Time to Cook? Think Again!**

If you're like most busy people, you are still not convinced that there are enough hours in the day to get your work done, run your household, and still cook nutritious meals.

But with these tips in this Click and Learn Course, mealtime is a snap – and you and your family can enjoy healthy, delicious, varied meals that go from counter top to tabletop with a minimum of fuss.

You've learned to shop smart by purchasing nutritious foods that cook quickly. Remember to enlist the aid of all your kitchen helpers - those small appliances such as your food processor, blender, microwave and pressure cooker - that make traditionally time-consuming jobs go a lot faster. Then get creative!

And here's where the real bonus comes in. By approaching mealtime preparation in this healthy fashion, you'll be able to cook with less fat and put more nutrient-rich fruits and vegetables in your diet. This is the type of eating that helps put diseases like cancer, heart disease and diabetes at bay – and makes feeling good an everyday occurrence.

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### **References:**

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Freezing Cooked Food for Future Meals: Freezer Bag Tips, prepared by Alice Henneman, Extension Educator, University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension in Lancaster County.



## Participant Satisfaction Survey

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Please complete this brief Satisfaction Survey after completing the course. Return to the Red River County Extension Office by:

\*E-mail: [mmiller@aq.tamu.edu](mailto:mmiller@aq.tamu.edu)

\*Fax: (903)427-3867

\*Mail: Meko Miller, CEA-FCS, 402 North Cedar Street, Clarksville, TX 75426

\*Drop off at the Red River County Extension Office located across the street from the courthouse.

Participants who complete this brief Satisfaction Survey will be entered to win a cookbook valued at \$25.00.

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**Overall, how satisfied are you with the online method of receiving information?**

- Not at all    Slightly    Somewhat    Mostly    Completely

**How satisfied are you with this Click and Learn Course?**

1. Accuracy of information

- Not at all    Slightly    Somewhat    Mostly    Completely

2. Helpfulness of the information for you and your family

- Not at all    Slightly    Somewhat    Mostly    Completely

3. Length of the information given in the Home Study Course

- Not at all    Slightly    Somewhat    Mostly    Completely

4. Quality of course materials

- Not at all    Slightly    Somewhat    Mostly    Completely

**What additional information in this subject area would be helpful to you?**

**Name and Address or Phone Number (so we can contact you after the drawing for prizes):**