

Cook Once, Eat for a Month!

Fact Sheet

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Introduction

Preparing a month of meals in a single day seems like a daunting task, but it can be done. This lesson will teach individuals the basics of this method of preparing meals, providing them with the tools they need to provide healthy, home-cooked meals for their families. Once people learn this method of cooking, they will begin to see the many benefits it can provide.

Why Cook This Way?

This method of cooking has many benefits. First, it saves money. Whether you work outside the home or stay at home, busy schedules sometimes do not allow time to prepare dinner. Busy schedules often lead to eating out, which is more expensive than a home-cooked meal. Having a prepared entrée that you can simply put in the oven saves money and preparation time.

Providing a healthy meal is another benefit of this cooking method. When you prepare the recipes yourself, you are in control of the ingredients and ultimately what your family is eating. While some fast food restaurants do provide healthy alternatives, not all do, and often family members do not select those healthy alternatives. Being in control of the meal allows you to incorporate more fruits and vegetables into the recipe. One of every five children is now obese, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. These children are at an increased risk for a host of serious lifetime physical complications. Seventy-seven percent of overweight kids become obese adults because lifetime eating habits are established in childhood. The Cook Once method provides families with an effective tool to combat obesity.

Perhaps the greatest benefit of this method is how it can encourage the family to eat meals together. Family mealtimes are slowly becoming a thing of the past. In today's society, the family makeup has changed from a two-parent household to a variety of other family structures. In 2006, the percentage of children under the age of 18 living in a two-parent household was 67 percent, a decline from 85 percent in 1970, according to statistics gathered by the Child Trends Databank. This change in dynamics often means that children are residing in households where the adult(s) work full time and do not have the time to plan a healthy and nutritious home-cooked meal every evening.

How Do You Do It?

Step 1: Choose the recipes

When choosing recipes, select recipes that will freeze well, including those containing meat, poultry, and fish. Other good recipe choices include breads, baked goods, and many soups, stews, and casseroles. Foods that do not freeze well include raw salad vegetables; raw or hard-boiled eggs in their shells; potatoes; gelatin salads or desserts; icing made with egg whites; boiled frostings or cakes with cream fillings; instant rice; rice, macaroni, or spaghetti when frozen by itself for another use; custard pies, cream pies, or pies with meringue. If you are not sure about how a

prepared food freezes, try freezing just a small portion the first time and checking to see if the quality is acceptable in one to two months or more.

Before choosing recipes, take an inventory of your pantry and freezer. Using recipes that will incorporate items already purchased will save money at the grocery store. Consider selecting recipes that use a variety of meats. Choose dishes that your family will like — now is not the time to try out new recipes.

Step 2: Make a list of needed ingredients

Create a list of ingredients needed for the recipes. Write down all items needed, even those you think you already have on hand. Include all necessary storage containers, freezer bags, aluminum foil, or other wraps. Use thicker freezer bags rather than regular storage bags to avoid leaks and tears.

Step 3: Create a shopping list

Go through the ingredient list item by item, checking off things you have on hand and adding needed items to a shopping list. For shopping ease, organize your list by putting like items together. For example, group produce, dairy, canned goods, and freezer supplies. To speed up the shopping trip, organize this list by store layout. (The less time you spend in the store, the less money you will be likely to spend.)

Step 4: Go shopping

Be prepared to spend the bulk of the monthly grocery budget in this one trip, keeping in mind you are shopping for a month of meals. Also, be prepared to spend more time than normal at the grocery store. If you have children, consider hiring a babysitter or leaving them with a friend or grandparent so you do not get distracted and forget something.

It is always a good idea to eat before you go shopping. You are less likely to give in to impulse buys when you shop with a full stomach. Shopping in one big trip also cuts down on trips where you think you only need one or two items, and end up purchasing more than you intended. Be a smart shopper. Study store ads for sales on needed items and use coupons whenever possible.

Step 5: Preparation

Before cooking day, clean out the freezer, making room for the entrées. This is a great time to throw out unmarked or other outdated items in your freezer. All dishes prepared should fit easily in a refrigerator's freezer.

Make a list of preparation steps to help the day run smoothly. Plan to combine steps for different recipes when possible. For example, if two recipes call for browned ground beef, brown the ground beef for both recipes at the same time.

Prepare the workspace the day before by removing all unnecessary items from the work area (canisters, mixers, and decorations, for example). Once the workspace has been cleared, set out all needed utensils and nonperishable items. This includes measuring cups and spoons, pots and pans, spices, canned goods, and storage containers. Label storage containers with the name of the item and brief cooking instructions —





such as oven temperature and cook time — or the page in the cookbook where the recipe can be found.

A little prep work will need to be done the night before. Chop vegetables and cut up meat, bread, or other items that need to be prepared.

Step 6: Cooking Day

Start the day by following the preparation steps that have been outlined. Check them off as they are completed so none are missed. If you are preparing a two-week cycle of menus, it should take about half a day to complete the process. If a full month of menus is being prepared, be ready to spend the entire day cooking.

When cooking, always keep in mind food safety basics such as washing hands frequently, keeping hair tied back, and being aware of food temperatures. Use a food thermometer to ensure safe temperatures have been reached. Let foods cool almost to room temperature before putting them into freezer bags. (Freezer bags can melt if the food is too hot when packaged.) Squeeze out excess air before sealing the bag.

Clean as you go for a smoother day. To make clean-up time faster, stop and wash dishes occasionally.

Step 7: Enjoy

Create a calendar for the family to follow with a list of the meals and side dishes. Save spaces on the calendar, like weekends, to eat leftovers. Then post this calendar on the refrigerator or where the entire family will see it. That way, everyone knows what's for dinner and can help with preparation.

Make it Work for You

The goal of this lesson is to help you create more family mealtimes in your own home. This won't happen unless you tailor this method to work for you. Here are some tips to help you do that:

- If a recipe provides more servings than your family will use in a given meal, divide the recipe into two meals.
- Adapt recipes by substituting ingredients you know your family won't like with ones they will like.
- Use the buddy system. Cooking with a friend or friends and sharing ingredients will help you save money in the long run, not to mention it's a lot of fun to cook in a group.



Resources:

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