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Meal Planning Made Easy - Three Styles of Healthy Supper Meal Planning

By Andrea Holwegner BSc, RD

Connie uses the term “hangry” to describe the time in the late afternoon where she arrives home from work feeling angry as a result of being too hungry. Salty chips or crackers could be inhaled in minutes with enough calories to qualify as a meal. Fatigued from the day and being unmotivated to cook led to suppers full of convenience foods or as simple as a bowl of cereal. Connie was tired of feeling tired and knew she needed to stop procrastinating shopping and cook healthier fresh foods. She learned the trick was scheduling a firm grocery shopping day and preplanning simple nutritious meals she could prepare quickly.



Regardless if you are cooking for one, a newlywed couple sharing meals or have a large family to feed, a little goes a long way when it comes to meal planning.

Why meal planning is time well spent

Good for your health and waistline

It is no surprise that the old saying by Benjamin Franklin, “If you fail to plan you are planning to fail,” applies to health, nutrition and weight management.

Having even a simple meal plan, especially when it comes to supper, is one of the most important things you can do for your health. Over the years when I ask our clients “What is for supper tonight?” the vast majority of people do not have a clue so it is no surprise this is often the most stressful meal of the day.

Without a plan in place it is easy to go for fast food and packaged foods that may not have your health at heart. Late in the afternoon is a time of day where energy levels are often depleted, blood sugars are low and the ability to think of creative ideas is hard. Without planning, key ingredients may be frozen instead of thawed, staple foods needed to cook basic recipes may be forgotten or fresh foods may be rotten when you go to use them.

Good for the planet and your budget

One-third of food produced for humans (1.3 billion tonnes) is wasted somewhere along the food chain each year (The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2011).

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In Canada per year, an estimated \$27 billion in food ends up in the landfill and composting. This is approximately 40 per cent of all food produced and two per cent of the GDP. Fifty-one per cent of Canadian waste directly comes from food thrown away in Canadian homes (Food Waste in Canada, Value Change Management, Nov 2010).

Canadian households are preparing or cooking too much, not using food in time and being unsure of how long to keep leftovers. Since food waste creates higher carbon and methane there is economic and environmental benefits to wasting less food.

Three meal-planning styles

The Geek (Structured Meal Plan)

The Geek loves planning ahead, finds comfort in structure and enjoys organized regimes. The Geek shops once a week and would be attracted to apps that have a grocery shopping list or developing a reusable list of all the foods they want to have on hand. They have busy schedules, are good time managers and supper plan for the week to match their schedule. They cook in batches and like freezer-friendly recipes such as soup, stew, casseroles and more. The Geek would be apt to pre-chop raw veggies for the week and prepare a part of a meal or an entire meal that could be eaten the next day to save time.

The Maven (Sometimes Meal Plan)

The Maven uses a mix of structure and spontaneous meal planning. Often the Maven would enjoy planning three or four general supper themes for the week, such as one of the following themes (vegetarian, fish or seafood, poultry, and meat theme). The Maven may instead pick broad themes such as "Meatless Mondays, Seafood Sundays or Family Favourite Fridays." The other unplanned supper meals would be for quick grabs such as fast breakfast-for-supper options, leftovers, eating out or something spontaneous.

The Enthusiast (Spontaneous Meal Plan)

The Enthusiast lives by William Cowpers quote, "Variety's the very spice of life, that gives it all its flavour." The Enthusiast would find planning supper for the week suffocating as they enjoy spontaneity. Opposite to the Geek (who plans-then-shops), the Enthusiast shops-then-plans. The Enthusiast appreciates what is seasonal and fresh and will start meal planning with this in mind. Grocery shopping and farmers market trips with an Enthusiast are usually not a chore, but an adventure. They are foodies that allow their senses to inspire the menu. Enthusiasts are creative and can substitute and adjust recipes on the fly. They enjoy the flexibility of knowing they are having seafood or chicken for supper today or tomorrow, but how it will be cooked and what it will be served with will be decided at the time of cooking and what is in the fridge ready to be used.

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Wondering which style of menu planning works for my family? We use a combination, as there are benefits to each. We have a reusable grocery shopping list for staple foods and take advantage of cooking in bulk for freezer-friendly meals. We aim for a fresh fish or seafood meal on farmers market days and do our best to have meatless Mondays. Considering we are foodies, we love the flexibility of letting what we see at the farmers market inspire the menu for the week.

Andrea Holwegner, known as the Chocoholic Dietitian, is founder and president of Health Stand Nutrition Consulting Inc., a member of the Canadian Association of Professional Speakers and a media expert for the Dietitians of Canada. For nutrition counselling information and to sign up for a free monthly newsletter loaded with nutrition tips, recipes and more visit www.healthstandnutrition.com. Twitter @chocoholicRD.

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