

On Menu Planning and Easy Advance Prepwork

Here are some ideas for making home and take-to-work meals easier and more likely to happen in a busy life...for all of the reasons covered in this module. Not every idea will appeal to you or work with your routines, but some may. These ideas might also spark some of your own.

*purchase several sets of containers in various small sizes—this way you can prepackage snacks like nuts or crackers right after shopping. Also, you can fill containers for several days' worth of snacks after chopping carrots or other vegetables. And you can have leftovers ready to go in individual servings.

*pick a time each week prior to grocery shopping to plan that week's menu. It can be rough or tentative if necessary. Jot down an idea for each evening you'll be home for dinner. Think in terms of shared ingredients for some evenings, for meals that will provide leftovers for an evening or two. You might think of what ingredients are in season as a starting point. For example, using up squash and tomatoes in summer, apples in the fall, etc. Or, base some of your plan on what you know is on sale where you shop. Your family can participate in planning, too, if desired. Then make your shopping list based on the menu plan. Bring the plan with you to the store. If you find something intriguing, you can alter the menu a bit then and there if you like.

*when you return from shopping, pre-package non-perishable snack items for the week so they're easy to pack when needed.

*set one of your food prep times a chopping session. Put chopped onions, peppers, carrots, etc. in bags for use in cooking, in small containers for snacks.

*make one evening or weekend time for larger-scale cooking—perhaps a roast chicken, a big pot of soup, or a healthy casserole. These items may provide two dinners and/or a couple of lunches as well. While they're cooking, use your kitchen time to make hard-boiled eggs, wholegrain muffins, or some other sort of snack or side-dish food to have available.

*some families rotate the menu planner each week or month. Some rotate the cook each day or week. Think creatively about how all of you can eat more healthy whole food prepared at home.

*shop from a list as much as possible. This will limit impulse buying. When tempted to buy foods that get you into trouble, STOP. Ask yourself why you'd do this. Watch for justifications that don't really make a lot of sense. Research has shown that men tend to stick to lists better than women when grocery shopping. If you are a female shopper who tends to overbuy, consider trading this job for one of your husband's or son's.

*plan at least one vegetarian meal per week. This offers health, savings, and environmental benefits. Vegetarian casseroles, soups, and stews lend themselves well to large-batch cooking, too, yielding lunch leftovers.

*develop a small repertoire of nutritious, easy, fast meals that you like. See the resource list for ideas if you don't already have such a repertoire. Then once every week or two, you can put one of these meals on the menu. Think here of things like wholegrain tortillas with tomatoes, beans, and melted cheese. Total time, less than 20 minutes.