

Meal Planning for Health and Finances

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A common problem for people on the go is arriving home after a long day of work with no idea what to make for supper and no ingredients to make it. In that situation you are much more likely to go for take-out or cook prepared and heavily processed foods which are often very high in sodium, variable in nutrient density and often more expensive than you could have done it yourself. So what can you do about it? Here are 3 easy steps to making and maintaining a meal plan while saving money on food and decreasing waste.

1. Find out what is in your fridge, freezer and pantry.

- Take an inventory of the foods that you use most often so that you know when they are running low (e.g. eggs, milk, flour, cereal grains etc.).
- When items are running low add them to a posted grocery list that is easy for everyone in the home to find
- Get into the habit of maintaining that list so that you are never “suddenly out” of something that you need on a daily basis.

2. Read your flyers

- Every week on a certain day (Thursday in my neighbourhood) the new flyers come out to your area and you can check out what is on sale at various locations in the grocery chains (e.g. chicken breast , fresh fish, fresh or frozen meat, vegetables or other staples)
- Take 10-20 minutes to scan through the flyers and establish the best deals so that you can buy for both now and stock up on certain items that you know you will need again that are either non-perishable, or you can fit in your freezer

3. Make a meal plan

- If you don't, then here is a good way to start...
- Keep breakfast simple (e.g. large flake oats with milk, cinnamon and raisins) and have the same thing most days allowing for a variation once in a while (e.g. eggs with toast and jam). Make sure to have those staples covered consistently and stock up when there are deals. It decreases your planning every week to just breakfast simple
- Plan to prepare more than you and your family can finish at one sitting for dinner so that most days, lunch can be leftovers from last night's supper. There you go, nothing fancy done and two meals out of every day covered.

- Plan 7 suppers for the upcoming week and add to your grocery list based on the ingredients required for those 7 meals. If you base at least a few of those meals on the flier discounts this week it will help narrow your recipe hunt (e.g. chicken breast and spinach are on sale...add some onion, carrots and peppers and make it a stir fry with your favorite sauce served with a side of rice or noodles).
- If you don't have any recipes in mind but you want to build around a few ingredients then enter those ingredients along with the word "recipes" into a Google search and you will find more ideas than you can use. Websites like allrecipes.com cooks.com and magazine sites like Canadian Living and Food & Drink have great ideas to get you started

Don't be too hard on yourself when you are getting started

- Meal planning gets easier with every week because you add to your repertoire of recipes, learn where to get good deals on the foods you like and maintain your pantry, fridge and freezer for staples and you waste less food that was purchased with no meal attached to it.
- If you have eaten out a lot in the past or are used to bringing food home, then don't try to overhaul you life in one shot. Allow for one or two of those 7 suppers to be left-overs, restaurant, or prepared foods. Rome wasn't built in a day and neither should you expect to overhaul your buying and eating patterns overnight.

Other ideas

- As you are doing groceries, read your labels and choose items with better profiles and fewer non-desirable preservatives and chemicals. You may find that you change your buying patterns and brand choices with time as you educate yourself.
- Once you have found recipes that you like try organizing them into a binder so that you can find them easily in the future and don't have to re build from nothing every time you have to come up with 7 more suppers.
- Take pride in knowing what you are putting into your body and reap the rewards of saving money that was going to restaurant meals and fast food.

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