



Freezer Meals for Family Mealtime

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Freezing meals can make it easy to eat together

Have you ever considered preparing two weeks' worth of meals in a single day? Though this may seem like a daunting task, it can be done. The greatest advantage of doing so is how convenient it becomes to provide home-cooked meals for your family. Try it once and you will see the many benefits it can provide.

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, crockpot, onto the stove, or grill 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. 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.

How Do You Do It?

Step 1: Choose the recipes

When choosing recipes, select recipes that will freeze well. Consider selecting recipes that use a variety of meats. Recipe choices include marinated meats, soups, stews, and casseroles. Choose dishes that your family will like. For example, mix all of the raw ingredients for your meatloaf recipe in a freezer bag and freeze it. Down the line, defrost the raw ingredients overnight in the refrigerator, and bake the meatloaf for dinner. Other recipe ideas include chicken fajitas (picture a bag of cut up raw chicken, spices, sliced onions and colorful peppers ready to be frozen and then defrosted and grilled down the line), Italian marinated flank steak, Spanish style garlic shrimp, honey balsamic chicken drumsticks, lemon rosemary pork tenderloin, beef enchilada stew, honey Dijon pecan crusted salmon, shredded beef burritos, and roasted turkey breast.

SOME TIPS TO CONSIDER:

- If a recipe provides more servings than your family will use in a given meal, divide the recipe into two meals.
- On the other hand, if you are making one batch of a recipe such as a meatloaf, why not make two or three meatloaves? You will be grateful in the weeks to come to have the meals on hand, ready to defrost and bake. If you are buying and preparing the ingredients for a meal that you know your family will enjoy, prepare more than one, each in their own freezer packaging.
- Adapt recipes by substituting ingredients you know your family won't like with ones they will like.
- Consider the buddy system. Cooking with a friend or friends and sharing ingredients such as seasonings and spices will help you save money in the long run, not to mention it's a lot of fun to cook together.

Step 2: Make a list of needed ingredients

Create a list of ingredients needed for the recipes. Write down all the items needed, even those you think you already have on hand. Include all necessary storage containers, such as freezer bags.

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, many of the recipes may call for items such as onions and peppers. Group produce, dairy, meats, canned goods, and staples together.

Step 4: Go shopping

Be prepared to spend more than your typical weekly grocery store bill, keeping in mind you are shopping for two weeks of meals or more. If you are purchasing several pounds of chicken, ground beef, onions, etc., this may be a good time to include a stop at a warehouse store or wholesale club, such as Sam's Club, BJ's or Costco.

Step 5: Preparation

Before you begin preparing food, clean out the freezer, making room for the entrées. 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 first, such as chopping vegetables and cutting up meat. Plan to combine steps for different recipes when possible. For example, if several recipes call for sliced green peppers, prepare all of them at the same time.

Step 6: Freeze Recipes

Follow the preparation steps for each of the recipes that you will be preparing, check them off as they are completed so none are missed. When preparing a two-week cycle of menus, it should take about four to five hours to complete the process.

When preparing food, always keep in mind food safety basics such as washing hands frequently, keeping surfaces clean, hair tied back, and being aware of food temperatures.

Step 7: Enjoy

Create an inventory that lists the freezer meals that you have prepared. Pull meals out of the freezer one day in advance to thaw in the refrigerator. Make it work for you. Create more family mealtimes in your own home.