

Tips for easier menu planning

Editors note: This is the first of a series of articles on meal/menu planning designed for the novice and the experienced cook alike. The final article will detail how to prepare a holiday dinner from planning the menu to tips on serving. So if you are hosting Christmas dinner for the first time and are about to panic, don't, help is on the way. By Linda Lee, special writer

How would it be if you never had to worry about what to have for dinner again? In addition, you could save between \$5 and \$50 per week, be assured of nutritious meals, and spend less time producing these meals?

I know it's possible — I've done it! The formula for my success is an understanding of meal planning, and the good news is it's easier than you think.

In this series of articles, I will detail the plan that has worked for me and my family of seven. We will cover steps in menu preparation, how to transfer your meal plans to a shopping list, adjusting to a budget, working with a minimum amount of time; preparing for company and holiday meals, with no extra cost.

It would be impossible for me to make a menu for you. We each have individual preferences in foods, and with the huge variety available to us, there is no need to be bound by another's ideas. There are two basic rules that are all you need to make a correct choice in planning your meals.

First, each day should include foods from each of the four food groups which are: (1)Fruits and Vegetables; (2)Breads and Cereals; (3)Meat, Poultry, Fish and Beans; (4) Milk and Cheese.

Second, you must eat a variety of each food group, prepared in a variety of ways. With these rules firmly in mind, we can begin.

TAKE A standard 8 1/2 x 11 sheet of paper and turn it sideways so you will be writing across the long side. You will be making eight columns. Beginning with the day you plan to grocery shop,

write the days of one week across the top. In the eighth column write: "Next week's grocery list." Divide the sheet into three sections. The top for breakfast, middle for lunch and the bottom for dinner.

Next look at your appointment calendar. Any meals that will be affected by special activities you have planned are going to be the first ones you fill in because generally, meals must "take" to other activities and without proper planning, the nutrition element often goes out the window. By planning these meals first, you can choose nutritious, but time-saving meals for these times. For example, let's assume Thursday night is a hockey night. You don't have time to find something and cook it so, instead you visit a local fast food restaurant, and eat in the car, or, (I shudder to think) you eat chips and pop at the arena.

No menu should ever have chips and pop scheduled as dinner — but, a fast-food dinner is not out of the question. At this time, in the quiet of your meal-planning area, you decide where the family will eat on Thursday. No more asking, "Where would you like to go?" and getting as many suggestions as there are people. You plan the meal.

Let's say you choose Taco's. (Just because Taco Tim appears them in five minutes doesn't mean they're altogether of no food value.) In Thursday's dinner slot you write, "Taco's from Taco Tim's, milk" and, believe it or not you have represented the four food groups. Check it out . . . the shell is bread, the ground beef is meat, the lettuce is a vegetable/fruit and the cheese and milk are the fourth food group.

ANOTHER ADVANTAGE in pre-planning a fast food dinner is because you saved the decision time, you may be able to eat sitting down in the restaurant, and not on the run in the car.

Before you become too elated about the idea of fast foods satisfying nutrition requirements . . . It's a good time to look at the drawbacks.

Bucks — A family of four could easily spend \$10.00 at Tim's for one meal. Multiply that by the 21 meals that are required, and you have a food budget of

\$210.00. Secondly, the nutrition content is very hard to determine on prepared foods. However, there are statistics available and they are surprisingly complete.

An alternative to fast food could be homemade taco's. You could have the lettuce, cheese and onions in separate containers in the fridge, and the meat cooked earlier and warming in the crock pot or the warming oven while you round up the rest of the family. In this case even home-prepared taco's won't be over a five-minute wait. The key is preplanning and in this case, prepreparation. Continue to use this method to fill in any meals that will conflict with your appointments.

Next, keeping in mind the two basic rules, fill in the blank spaces on your menu. Think of meals that you and your family have enjoyed in the past. Don't try to imitate magazine meals . . . yet. (If you have a very difficult time coming up with meal ideas, use a menu sheet to record the meals you are eating using your present system for a few weeks. Then you will have all the "ideas" you need to prepare a menu in advance.)

DON'T PLAN the same breakfast, lunch or dinner two days in a row. At first it may seem difficult to come up with seven different breakfasts at one sitting, but you can repeat Monday's on Wednesday, Tuesday's on Friday, etc. so you won't have to think up seven all at once.

It's a good idea to save old menu's so that when you get a "mind-blank" you can refer to past weeks and copy a meal you enjoyed. If you're really organized you can date your menu's and keep them in order so when foods are in-season you will be able to refer back to last year's menu and repeat favorite dishes.

As you fill in the meals, remember to schedule foods prepared in a variety of ways. Foods can be eaten raw, baked, poached, steamed, boiled, mashed, "fried" or, keep, pan or oven fried. nutritious and appetizing meal is one with a contrast of textures, colors and nutrients. For example, with spaghetti and meat sauce look for something

crunchy . . . garlic bread, or a crisp green salad . . . or both.

It's easier for me to fill in dinners before I plan my lunches, which makes no difference in the quality of the menu. The important thing is in any one day you are getting a good representation from each food group. If you had bacon and eggs for breakfast, and you plan a beef roast for dinner, you can have a meatless lunch and still satisfy the meat requirement on that day.

If you have a day planned that seems perfect except for a lack of vegetables . . . add a salad. If you need more of the bread group, add croutons to the salad, or include breadsticks. The fast-food taco dinner mentioned earlier is pretty skimpy on the vegetable, so Thursday's lunch or dinner will include a good amount in the vegetable/fruit group to make up for it.

CONTINUE TO use this kind of reasoning and fill out the remainder of your menu.

After you are finished, double check each day individually for a good representation of the four food groups. Next, check from day to day for a good variety of color, texture, nutrients and preparation techniques. Make changes as needed to comply with these two important rules.

Eventually you will be able to easily plan a week's meals using beef no more than three days, and poultry no more than two days. Your menu will include a good color variety in the vegetable/fruit area. It will also include a variety of breads . . . and you won't be eating fried foods, or the same kind of cheese all the time.

By having a plan down on paper it's much easier to keep track of what you and your family are eating, and you should I make for dinner? again. Now, don't you feel good?

Beginning with your menu, you will be able to adjust your meals to your budget, your time, your special eating needs, and you will be able to produce company and holiday meals without blinking and eye.

Just trust me, and follow along for the next few weeks.

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Start day right with orange pancakes

Eating a good breakfast each morning is the best way to start the day. Breakfast provides your body with fuel for the day, just as gasoline feeds your car. If you'll choose not to "fill up" each morning, you may be running close to empty before you start the day.

Remember — breakfast should provide 1/4 to 1/3 of your day's nutrients and calories.

If you're really in a pinch for time, consider a breakfast-on-the-run recipe. Easy to prepare blender drinks featuring nutritious orange juice will help you start the day right.

If time permits, orange pancakes are a super breakfast treat. Top these hotcakes off with a double treat — orange syrup.

Breakfast is important to everyone. Examine breakfast habits and enjoy these nutritious recipes featuring orange juice all school year.

ORANGE PANCAKES
2 cups biscuit mix
2 tbsps. orange rind (grated)
1 cup orange juice

1/2 cup milk
1 egg
2 cups (1 lb.) cottage cheese

Combine biscuit mix, orange rind, orange juice, milk and egg in bowl. Mix until moistened, but still lumpy. Heat and lightly grease griddle. Pour 1/4 cup batter for each pancake and turn once. Stack pancakes with 1/4 cup cottage cheese between each layer. Top with additional cottage cheese and orange syrup.

ORANGE SYRUP
1 1/2 cups light corn syrup
1 can (6 oz.) frozen orange juice concentrate (thawed, undiluted)

Mix corn syrup with concentrate until well blended. Pour over hot pancakes. Refrigerate remaining sauce.

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We think carob is good enough to make you switch for good, or at least to satisfy that chocolate craving most of the time. The Good Food Company has a wide range of carob products, including the whole carob pod, carob chips, candy bars, as well as carob SANTAS, carob SNOWMANS, carob CHRISTMAS TREES, carob TEDDY BEARS, and carob CHRISTMAS BELLS. The folks of Good Food Company wish you a safe and healthy holiday season.

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