

How to Make Healthy Meals at Home Easier During the Coronavirus Pandemic:

Feeding a family can be a challenge, even over a short weekend at home. Feeding a family three healthy meals a day during a quarantine can be downright chaotic! It is even more pressure if you are also trying to teach your kids and work from home, all at the same time. So, just in case you need a little help, we have some tips.

Tip #1: Keep it simple! Having a well-balanced meal doesn't have to be a banquet. You don't have to pull out the fine china. Don't forget that a warm steaming bowl of tomato soup and a piece of cheese toast on whole wheat bread with milk is still a healthy meal, and it's downright tasty!

Tip #2: Check what you already have on hand before you make a trip to the store. This may seem simple, but you would not believe how much food is wasted just because we overbuy and don't plan. Check the freezer, refrigerator, and cupboard for foods that need to be used. Make sure to include these in your meal plan.

Tip #3: Cook once, but eat twice. Think of this as having "planned overs" instead of "leftovers." Whenever possible, make two casseroles or lasagnas instead of just one. Eat one that night and freeze one for later. Also, if you know ahead of time that your family will not eat an entire dish, then break it up and save money. A pot of soup can easily serve a small family more than once. Just separate it into smaller amounts and freeze until later. There is no sense in wasting food, especially when groceries are so expensive.

Tip #4: Cook smart. Look over your weekly meal plan and see if you can combine two night's work into one. For example: if you are making tacos and spaghetti in the same week, then go ahead and brown enough ground beef for both meals. Separate it and keep enough in the fridge until the next night, for the second meal. Also, you can pre-chop some foods like onions or bell peppers and freeze them in airtight containers or freezer bags until time to use them. You could prepare a stir fry or soup on Sunday with any leftover vegetables from the previous week. Single serving containers in the freezer make super-fast lunches and dinners. Also, if you light your outside grill, then fill it up, you can make enough for more than one meal of protein. Later, you can heat them quickly in the microwave to get a meal started and cut your cooking time down. One example is, leftover grilled chicken tastes great on a salad.

Tip #5: Make a meal plan and follow it. Add the foods you have on hand already to help save money and time. Make and use a grocery list and don't take the kids shopping with you, if possible. Each extra person will add time to how long it takes to get through the store and impulse purchases. Make sure to take your list so you can get everything in one trip.

Tip #6: Don't forget the pantry items that can make meals easier. Sometimes, we think a healthy meal has to be hard to make and made totally from scratch. Don't forget that chicken noodle soup made with canned chicken can still be made both healthy and tasty. Plus, during these times of shortages in the stores, it may be easier to find canned rather than fresh chicken. Tuna is a great pantry staple to have on hand. Tuna is not only an affordable meat choice, but MyPlate guidelines encourage eating seafood several times per week, and tuna salad is simple to prepare.

Tip #7: Pre-prep ingredients. After a busy day, I am usually very hungry and not in the mood to cook from scratch. Do yourself a favor and be ready for that situation by having pre-prepped ingredients ready. Go ahead and take a free minute on Saturday to cut up fruit and vegetables and store in the refrigerator. We are much more likely to reach for fruits and vegetables for snacks that have already been cut up.

You may want to print out and make copies of the attached grocery shopping list and meal planner to use when you plan your meals. When planning, you might want to ask your family for meal ideas that they would enjoy. Maybe let each member choose one night a week, or ask the kids if there are any new recipes they would like to help cook. Use this downtime at home to start a new habit and become closer as a family at the same time.

There can be a bright side. We may be staying at home during the coronavirus; however, we are cooking and eating more meals at home than ever before. That usually means we are making healthier choices. Eating out less often is a good habit we all need to work on. Take this time to learn some new recipes, cook with your kids, read books, or participate in a hobby you've always wanted to try. Try a new work out video or exercises you can do at home with your kids. Have a dance party in the living room. Hopefully, with these tips, you will be inspired to look at cooking and staying at home during the coronavirus pandemic in a whole new way.

Best wishes for a happy and healthy 2020!

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