

- » Exploring different schools of thought on meal prep
- » Figuring out which method is best for you

Chapter **1**

Finding the Meal-Prep Method That's Right for You

In this chapter, I introduce you to a variety of styles of meal prep, from prepping all on one day to partial prep to freezing meals and batch cooking. There's no right way to do meal prep — it's more about figuring out what works best for you and your family. You can do all your meal prep on one day, or you can prep parts of a meal, or a combination of both.



REMEMBER

As you embark on the journey of meal planning and into meal prep, be sure to give yourself a little time, patience, and grace. Changing habits takes time, but the more you do it, the faster and easier it'll become.

MEAL PREP VERSUS MEAL PLANNING

Meal planning is planning which meals you want to make in the week ahead — lasagne on Monday, tacos on Tuesday, and so on. You can use your meal plan to create a grocery list so you have all the ingredients to make those meals.

Meal prep is actually preparing the meals. You can do meal prep in stages or all at once.

Meal planning and meal prep don't have to be complicated. You don't have to cook every day, and they aren't strictly set in stone. Instead, think of them as useful tools to help you create budget-friendly, healthy meals at home, instead of stressing about what you'll eat for every meal.

Prepping One Day, Eating for the Week

Whether it's just prepping breakfast, lunch, or even all your meals, some people enjoy cranking out meal prep in one day, so they only have to do minimal cooking throughout the week.

How to do it

With this approach, you start by planning however many meals you need for the week. Then you create a grocery list and go shopping. Finally, you prep as many of the components as you can for each meal. This may mean combining spices in advance, premeasuring and prechopping ingredients, labeling the items for the meal, and refrigerating together.

With this form of meal prep, consider prepping for three or four days at a time. This will give you room for leftovers or a change in plans that may prevent you from eating at home. Besides, most ingredients are best prepped only a couple days ahead of time in order to retain the freshness and integrity of the food.

Who it's for

If you have the mental bandwidth to plan and prep for the week, the time to prep one day a week, and little time for cooking during the week, this method is for you. I use this method of meal prep when I know I'll have very little time in the coming week, but I want to make sure we're eating at home. You can also use a variety of meal preps to help execute the full week of meals — from freezer meals to ready-to-eat meals.



If this style of meal prep makes you happy, consider checking out my dear friend and fellow chef and dietitian, Allison Schaaf, over at PrepDish.com (<https://prepdish.com>). She specializes in gluten-free meal prep, prepped one day and enjoyed for the week.

MEALS THAT GUIDE YOUR YEAR

On average, most Americans have about a dozen meals that they routinely make all year long. For instance, my mom would make spaghetti, sloppy joes, hamburgers, cream of turkey over biscuits, shake-and-bake chicken, stuffed peppers, tacos, chicken noodle soup, macaroni and cheese, pizza, grilled chicken, and fried chicken regularly — and I'm recounting this after 30 years of not living in her house! Humans like to eat what we're comfortable with and what's familiar. A great way to expand on this menu pattern is to create subtle changes in the menu. Take a moment and write down 12 meals you frequently make in your home.

Then work on revamping and revitalizing these meals with subtle changes. For instance, using my mom's meals as an example, here's how I would morph her standard meals and create new ones:

Instead of . . .	Try . . .
Spaghetti	Beef, mushroom, and kidney bean spaghetti
Sloppy joes	Southwestern turkey sloppy joes
Hamburgers	Greek lamb burgers
Cream of turkey over biscuits	Cream of turkey with peas over whole-grain biscuits
Shake-and-bake chicken	Shake-and-bake Mexican chicken
Stuffed peppers	Quinoa-stuffed peppers
Tacos	Fish tacos
Chicken noodle soup	Chicken and sweet potato soup
Macaroni and cheese	Butternut squash macaroni and cheese
Pizza	Whole-grain pizza
Grilled chicken	Grilled chicken with chimichurri sauce
Fried chicken	Fried chicken salad

Using a different spice blend, protein, or more vegetables can really transform a meal. Now you have 24 meals in your routine, instead of just 12!

Preportioning Meals

Another popular style of meal prep is where you prep meals in advance. Generally, people make one set meal and then place it in a container for the week, to be reheated or enjoyed cold.

How to do it

Make a stew, roast, or sheet-pan meal on one day. Then take that meal and pre-portion it into containers to eat for the week. You can also do this with breakfasts, salads, or bowls (see Part 3).

Who it's for

If you're okay with eating the same thing all week, if you prefer cooking only one day and reheating for a meal, or if you're really tight on time for the week, this approach is for you.



TIP

Be sure to get some variety. Eating the same thing for every dinner doesn't provide a variety of nutrients, so consider mixing up the proteins and vegetables each week to ensure you're getting enough nutrients.



WARNING

One potential downside to this approach is boredom. By day 3, the drive-thru may be more tempting than microwaving the same meal again or eating the same salad.

Batch Cooking

Batch cooking is a budget-friendly way to cook large portions of meat or vegetables and then create different meals with them for the week. Chapters 9–13 highlight ways to make popular large cuts of meat and ways the meats can be used in different meals to keep it fun and new.

How to do it

Batch cooking requires buying meat in bulk and spending a good amount of time to roast or pressure-cook the meat in advance. While the meat is cooking, you can utilize the time to prep meals you want to make with the meat for the week.

Who it's for

If you prefer to buy meat in bulk, if you have the time to slow-roast or cook the meat on one day, and if you don't mind eating the same meat all week, this method is for you. (You could also freeze the cooked meat and use it another week, if you don't want to eat the same meat all week.)

Prepping and Freezing

If you love your Instant Pot or slow cooker this may be the style of meal prep for you! You just need the freezer space to store the meals.

How to do it

Plan freezer-friendly, slow-cooker, or multicooker meals. Prep and place the meals in freezer bags, label the bags, and freeze them for another day within the next month.

Who it's for

If you don't have much time to meal-prep every week and you prefer to knock meals out for the month; if you have ample freezer space (like a deep freezer); or if you absolutely love stews, soups, and pot roasts, this method is for you. During cold months, this approach may be especially appealing; perhaps less so in the summer. Check out Chapters 7 and 15 if this method appeals to you. I like having these meals on hand; I work them in throughout the week to mix things up!

Making Sheet-Pan Meals

Sheet-pan meals have become incredibly popular and are super simple. The concept is that you have your protein, vegetables, and starch all on one sheet pan that roasts for the same time and yields a complete meal when it's done cooking. The trick is having each element cook at the same temperature and time, but the bonus is less cleanup!

How to do it

Plan a starch, protein, and vegetable that can cook at the same time and temperature (or head to Chapter 14 where I've done the work for you!). Prep each element in advance and store them together. (For example, marinate your vegetables, create a spice mix for your protein, and cut up potatoes and store them in water prior to cooking.) Then, when it's time to execute, place each element on a parchment-lined sheet pan, roast, and serve.

Who it's for

If you have the oven space, you're cooking for fewer than four people, if you have the time and refrigerator space to prep and store, and if you don't mind heating up your home with the oven, this method is for you.



TIP

If you have a larger family, you can use more sheet pans and oven racks.

Following a Formula

No, this method isn't about breaking out a scale and doing math equations! Instead, the formula is more about planning a protein, a starch, and a vegetable, and keeping it simple. Honestly, this is about 50 percent of how I do meal prep. Every week, I harvest vegetables or pick up something from my local farmer's market that inspires a meal. I keep meat stocked in my freezer that I pull out for the week. Then I find a yummy starch (rice, couscous, pasta, or potatoes) to pair with the meal. This is where sauces come in handy. Head to Chapter 20 where I highlight sauces just for these occasions.

How to do it

Get inspired by your local, in-season produce or protein deals at your favorite market. Create a meal plan that accounts for a protein, vegetables, and add a starch. From here, you can do partial prep for the week and pull together a quick meal. Having a well-stocked pantry is essential with this type of meal prep!

Who it's for

If you like to create meals from bargain buys or seasonal produce, if you get a community supported agriculture (CSA) box or you have a vegetable garden, if you buy meat in bulk and need to work through it in your freezer, or if the idea of this simple formula (protein + veggies + starch) appeals to you, this method is for you. Head to Chapters 16, 17, and 20 for recipes to start with.

Hammering Out “Build-Your-Own” Bars

Salad bars, potato bars, pizza bars, taco bars, sandwich bars . . . maybe meal prep in your house needs to speak to many different taste buds. If this is the case, creating a “bar” is a great approach.

How to do it

Let your family members build their own meals. Plan out your favorite toppings, prep them in separate containers for the meal, store them, and pull them out to serve. This can be the ultimate family-style dining experience. Taco bars, salad bars, and potato bars are my family's favorites for the week. Roasting potatoes in advance or using the microwave can make this bar come together quickly.

Who it's for

Creating bars can help win the war with picky eaters. As a dietitian and a parent, I encourage you to let go of the dinnertime battles and empower your kids to serve themselves what they want to eat. We follow Ellyn Satter's (www.ellynsatterinstitute.org) Division of Responsibility, which means parents get to decide what will be served, when, and where, and the kid gets to decide if they eat and how much. I recommend always serving something they like on the “bar” but letting go of any other battles around the food after that. There's a lot of sound research out there supporting the Division of Responsibility. If you have a picky eater, head to Ellyn's website for added support! Now, “bars” don't require recipes, but if this sounds like you, head to Chapters 16 and 17 for baked potato and seasonal salads inspiration!

HANDLING PICKY EATERS

When meal planning, consider everyone who eats with you. If you have a picky eater in the house, consider offering at least one to two food items that you know they'll eat, but continue to serve other options, as well. For example, if your picky eater likes apples, peanut butter, and yogurt, make sure you have two of those offered at the table for each meal. When you take the time to plan and prep for the week, make sure that meals fit the tastes of your family. You can also remove a lot of unwanted arguments and pressure around the table and mealtimes.

Get kids involved in the meal planning and preparation for the week. Even if a picky eater won't eat the food, it's okay for them to help prep it. Kids are far more capable than we realize. Have them help with making yogurt parfaits or overnight oats. Let them build their own salad in a jar — even if it's nothing but bacon and ranch! The more they're exposed to new foods, even by touching the foods, the better!