

Tools to simplify your meal planning

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With stay-at-home orders in place for most states across the country, it may be easy to lose sight of healthy eating goals and efforts. We're out of our normal routines and our minds are pre-occupied with what's going on in the world. During times such as now, when we want to maximize the health of our immune systems, eating well can be more important than ever. These tools can help you stay (or get back) on track with eating well.

MAINTAIN MEAL STRUCTURE

Make nutrition a high priority. Try to maintain structure to your eating pattern. Though your office might currently look more like your living room, take a "lunch break" away from the computer. Treat yourself to a balanced meal every 4 to 5 hours.

BALANCE FOOD GROUPS

Balance the food groups we know so well: fruits, vegetables, grains and starches, protein, and dairy. Aim for at least 3 food groups at each meal.

- Include sources of protein throughout the day to maximize nutrition and satiety. This could include: nonfat or low-fat dairy products (milk, cottage cheese, yogurt, cheese), skinless chicken or turkey breast, fish or seafood, soy products, or legumes and lentils.
- Keep in mind the importance of fruits and vegetables, and include at least one serving at a meal. One serving of fruit is half a banana or a tennis ball-shaped apple, and one serving of vegetables is a small salad or ½ cup cooked broccoli.

EXPLORE NEW KITCHEN SKILLS

Use the extra time you may have to your advantage:

- Consider dusting off an old cookbook or tackling a pile of recipes you've been wanting to try.
- Hone your knife handling skills.
- Learning how to use the can of chickpeas that has been in your pantry for six months.
- Explore various ways to flavor whole grains.



CLEAR OUT THE PANTRY

Take this time of exclusively dining at home as an opportunity to use items from your pantry that may have been in there for months.

- Dry goods, including canned items, can be combined with flavorful dried herbs and spices to make a new soup creation.
- Turn to lower-cost dietary protein sources such as canned tuna and beans, or dried lentils and whole grains, to serve as a base for a balanced meal.

Expert tip: Don't forget to rinse canned items that may not already be labeled as low-sodium or no-salt-added varieties.

UTILIZE THE FREEZER

When trying to limit trips to the grocery store, fresh produce may be more difficult to keep on hand between grocery runs. Consider these tips when stocking your freezer:

- Frozen fruits and vegetables can be stocked and used in place of fresh.
- Choose unsweetened fruit to mix into smoothies or to prepare into a fruit compote.
- Frozen vegetables should be selected in their plain form instead of covered in a sauce or seasoning.
- Skinless chicken or turkey breast, fish or seafood are healthy sources of protein that freeze well.

PLAN AHEAD

Plan ahead for meals in the upcoming week, to make the most of every grocery trip. Consider:

- How many meals will you prepare from scratch?
- Will breakfast be a quick-assembly meal like cereal or peanut butter toast with fruit?
- Plan for leftovers. Will you have extra grilled chicken, or could you sauté more peppers than needed for the meal, to turn into a quick lunch the next day?

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