

Time Saving Strategies for Quick Meals

Can you relate to either of these two statements? Fifty percent of Americans spend less than one hour preparing a weekday meal. The average American cook wants to spend only 20-30 minutes in the kitchen. The truth is that most of us want meals that can be prepared quickly without having to always resort to prepackaged food.

Use the following strategies to speed up your meal preparation.

- Focus on One Portion of the Meal – When one portion of your meal may require a lot of time and energy to prepare, choose to compliment it with other dishes that are simple and easy to prepare.
- Prepare Foods in Advance – When you have extra time, prepare some ingredients ahead of time. This can save you cooking and cleaning time in the future. Be sure to refrigerate or freeze the foods that you prepare. Package them in portion sizes that you will use. Some ideas of preparing food ahead of time include:
 - ◇ Cook foods ahead in large quantities. For example, brown enough ground beef for two meals, or cook a double batch of rice, noodles, or potatoes.
 - ◇ Chop extra vegetables.
 - ◇ Shred cheese for future meals.
 - ◇ Assemble a casserole the night before.
- Try One-Dish Meals – One-dish meals are where your whole meal is combined into one dish. They are a great way to simplify. Some of their advantages include that they are quick and easy to prepare, you can use foods you have on hand, and you use fewer dishes. If you don't have any recipes for one-dish meals, try making up your own recipes by combining the following types of ingredients.
 - ◇ Rice, noodles, or macaroni
 - ◇ Meat, fish, or poultry
 - ◇ Soup or white sauce
 - ◇ Seasoning: chopped onion, chopped celery, and/or chopped green pepper. You can also add other herbs and spices.
 - ◇ Fresh, frozen, or canned vegetables
 - ◇ Topping: cracker, toast, or cereal crumbs
- Use Time-Saving Methods and/or Equipment – There are many time saving methods or equipment available to speed up your food preparation time.
 - ◇ Microwave or stovetop versions – Try doing microwave or stovetop versions of dishes that you usually cook in the oven, like skillet lasagna or microwave cornbread.
 - ◇ Slow cookers/crock pots – Although cooking time is longer, preparation time is usually very quick. Additionally, you do not have to constantly watch a slow cooker.
 - ◇ Pressure cookers – This cooking method takes less time than using a stovetop. It also preserves some nutrients due to the shorter cooking time and using less water. The steam can enhance natural flavors of food so you do not have to add a lot of salt, sugar, or other additives.
- Recruit Others to Help – Involve other family members in planning and preparing meals. This creates interest, teaches basic food preparation skills, and lessens your workload.

- Children in the Kitchen – Use the following tips when involving your children in meal preparation.
 - ◇ Supervise all activities to ensure safety.
 - ◇ Match the task to the child’s capabilities for a positive experience.
 - ◇ Provide detailed instruction and demonstration.
 - ◇ Incorporate cleanup into the experience.
- Collect Quick and Easy Recipes – Start a collection of easy-to-prepare recipes that utilize only a few ingredients and few steps. These recipes will be very valuable to you and your family on busy nights. Be sure to incorporate them into you meal planning. You can also try the “speed scratch” technique that involves combining fresh ingredients with convenience foods. An example of this would be to add sliced bananas to an instant pudding made with skim milk to make the center of a banana cream pie.
- Cook Once, Eat Twice – This is essentially the batch method. When time and money allow, cook a large batch of food, divide into family-sized portions, and freeze for later use. Don’t forget to label and date each package or container that you freeze food in.

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