

## Meal Planning: Getting Started

Have you ever stood in front of your refrigerator or kitchen cupboard and wondered what you were going to eat next? What if you're tired, out of ideas, or don't have the ingredients you need to create a healthy and satisfying meal?

Moments like these make it easy to choose restaurant or take-out meals, or packaged foods that are quick and easy to assemble. The problem is that many of these choices can be higher in fat, salt, and added sugar than is recommended. They may also be lower in the nutrients your body needs.

### Benefits of Meal Planning

Meal planning is the act of thinking ahead about what you'll make for meals and snacks and getting prepared. The effort it takes to get started pays you back in 3 ways:

1. *You'll eat healthier meals and snacks.* Meal planning gives you the opportunity to think about what you like to eat and how those foods help nourish your body. You can look at how you're eating overall, rather than one meal at a time. This gives you a better sense of whether you're meeting your healthy eating goals.
2. *You'll save time.* Meal planning makes shopping for groceries more efficient by reducing or eliminating those last-minute trips to the store. You can also plan ahead by making larger dishes that can be stored in the freezer for multiple meals in the future.
3. *You'll save money.* Meal planning can help ensure that foods and leftovers are used before they go to waste. Also, if you go to the grocery store with a plan and a list, you're less likely to make spontaneous purchases of foods you don't need.

### Tips to Increase Success

Use the tips below when getting started. Start slowly and build on your successes. Use what feels right and ignore the rest or come back to it later. The good news is that there is no "wrong" way to meal plan!

1. *Decide which meals and snacks you want to plan.* If you currently don't meal plan at all,

planning all your meals and snacks may feel overwhelming. Perhaps start by planning only dinners during the work week or meals for only 2 or 3 days. Add more days and meals once you're ready.

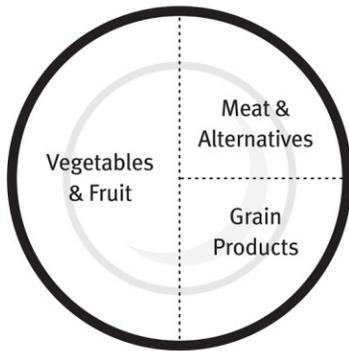
2. *Be realistic about what you have time to prepare.* Some days and weeks are busier than others. When you don't have a lot of time, choose simple meals that you've made before or ones that have short preparation and cooking times. This might be the perfect time to use a slow cooker. Or, you can prepare the meal ahead of time and simply re-heat it when you need it.
3. *Think about who you share your meals with. Invite them to work with you on the meal plan.* Consider everyone's needs and wants when it comes to the meals you choose. This doesn't mean macaroni and cheese every day to accommodate your picky four-year-old. But planning a bunch of meals that don't reflect your family's likes at all will lessen your chances of success and mealtime happiness.

### Meal Planning Steps

1. Choose a meal planning template to record your meals and snacks. You can try the one provided. Or, try using an erasable board in your kitchen or pantry, an Excel spreadsheet that you can print, or a recipe index or binder. You may have to experiment with different templates before you find the one that works best for you.
2. On the template you've chosen, write down the first meal you plan to prepare or the first ingredient you plan to use. Here are a few options to consider:
  - Pick a meal or recipe you already know and enjoy.
  - Pick your meat or alternative. Choose from fish, shellfish, poultry, meat, legumes, eggs, nuts, seeds, or tofu.
  - Pick an ingredient or a dish you want to learn how to prepare. Maybe you'd like to learn more about how to cook squash or

you want to try making a lentil dish.

- Pick an ingredient that is in season or on sale.
  - Pick foods that are already in your fridge, freezer or pantry that need to be used up.
3. If you've chosen a meal or recipe you already have, skip to Step 4. If you picked an ingredient, it's time to get creative. Go online, look in recipe books you own or at the library, or ask friends and family for their favourite recipes. Stick with websites, books and people you trust to avoid being disappointed.
  4. Plan the rest of the meal. Build your meal around what you've already picked. Some foods go together more naturally than others. This is where the plate model of eating can be helpful.



For example, if you've chosen to make teriyaki salmon, what grain products are you serving with it? What vegetable or fruit?

5. Make your grocery list. Once you have your meal written down and your recipe in front of you, start working on your grocery list. Don't forget to check that you have staple ingredients like vegetable oil, flour, and onions. Keep adding to this grocery list as you add more meals to your meal plan.
6. Repeat Steps 2 to 5 until your meal plan is finished.

**Tip:** Choose recipes with overlapping ingredients so you can minimize what you have to buy. For example, if you roast a chicken one day, add diced chicken on top of salad, shred it in a burrito, or slice it in a sandwich the following day. Not only does this save you time, it also saves you money. You can also double a recipe so that you can freeze it and use it on a day you don't have time to cook.

7. If snacks and desserts are part of your routine, don't forget to plan for them as well. Planning these can help you prevent purchasing less healthy options when you're hungry and more likely to be tempted.

## For More Information

- Heart and Stroke Foundation - Recipes & Meal Plans:  
<https://etools.heartandstroke.ca/HeartStroke/HWAP2/Recipes.aspx>
- Canadian Diabetes Association – Basic Meal Planning:  
[www.diabetes.ca/diabetes-and-you/healthy-living-resources/diet-nutrition/basic-meal-planning](http://www.diabetes.ca/diabetes-and-you/healthy-living-resources/diet-nutrition/basic-meal-planning)
- Government of Canada - Build a healthy meal: use the Eat Well plate:  
[www.healthycanadians.gc.ca/eating-nutrition/healthy-eating-saine-alimentation/tips-conseils/interactive-tools-outils-interactifs/eat-well-bien-manger-eng.php?\\_ga=1.58424618.1613893488.1423239478](http://www.healthycanadians.gc.ca/eating-nutrition/healthy-eating-saine-alimentation/tips-conseils/interactive-tools-outils-interactifs/eat-well-bien-manger-eng.php?_ga=1.58424618.1613893488.1423239478)

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### Weekday Meal Planning Template

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Breakfast					
Snack					
Lunch					
Snack					
Dinner					
Notes:					