

Meal Planning 101

Save Time, Money, And Your Sanity



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Introduction

The door slams open and the kids run in the house yelling “What’s for dinner?” It’s a scene all parents have experienced. We’ve all been there more often than we’d like to admit, glancing at the clock in panic. It’s dinnertime, already?

There we are again, searching the refrigerator, freezer, and pantry for something that could possibly resemble “dinner.” Then, when we finally think the solution to our dinner problem has been found, we realize a few needed ingredients are missing. So, now we grab the kids and run to the store, or worse, through a fast food place, dodging rush hour traffic, trying to hurry and get back so we can feed our family before we tuck them into bed.

If the concept of planning and preparing 3 meals a day, 21 meals a week or a whopping 1,092 meals a year seems overwhelming, you are not alone! Many folks just like you are scrambling around every day trying to come up with nutritious and budget-friendly meals for their busy families. All these families are looking for relief from the daily stress of simply trying to get dinner on the table.

This is where the art of menu planning comes into the picture. By taking the time to plan meals ahead, we are more likely to keep our sanity during our rushed evenings and stay within our budget, as well.

It may sound simple - writing out a few meals and grocery shopping ahead of time, but developing a real workable plan and sticking to it takes some organization. If you’ve tried meal planning in the past and found it difficult to stay on schedule, we are here to provide you with a helpful guide to get you back on track and organized. We want you to be able to provide nutritious, delicious, and inexpensive meals for your family every day of the week.

Let’s dive right in and of course you are welcome to email me at susanne@hillbillyhousewife.com with any questions or comments. If you have your own great meal planning tips I would love to hear from you. Let’s get cooking.



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Why Meal Planning?

Meal Planning Saves Time

By taking one scheduled block of time to make out your menu and your shopping lists, you no longer will spend countless hours running around at the last minute, driving through rush hour traffic, spending time standing in line at the grocery store, going through the fast food place, or even the neighborhood convenience store! That's time you thought was yours to spend with your family, until you realized you forgot to plan something for dinner. There goes movie night, story time, game night, playing catch, shooting buckets, and riding bikes with the kids. If that's not incentive to develop a meal plan, I don't know what is.

Meal Planning Saves Money

Your family budget probably works pretty well for most household expenses, but when it comes to your grocery budget, if you are not planning your meals ahead of time, you will find your money always runs out before your next pay check. The reason is because of those panicked trips to the grocery store, take-out, or convenience stores always cost more than a planned dinner. And, what about those pizza deliveries? Those are a real budget-buster!

If you have a family of four, and you're eating take-out even two times a week, you can easily spend over \$300 a month for just those meals. Now, consider those rushed trips to the grocery store. How many times have you walked out of the store with items that were unnecessary and unwanted, at least before you walked through the door. That's money you spent that you didn't intend to spend.

When you begin to plan your meals, you will know in advance what you will be spending on groceries and will have an easier time sticking to a budget. You may be able to cut your food spending by sixty percent – or even more!

One way to see the value of saving money by planning your meals is to start a "meal planning is fun" savings account. Take a look at the money you've spent on food in the last several months. That includes all groceries, fast food, take-out, and pizza deliveries.

Say you have been spending an average of \$600 a month on food, and now with your meals planned ahead you are only spending \$400 a month, you have \$200 to put in your fun savings account. That's a nice hunk of change to put toward a family outing or even a nice vacation.

Keep it up for a couple months and your family could really plan something special. Now that's incentive, indeed!

Meal Planning Teaches The Value Of Money

Never underestimate the value of the education you'll be giving your children when you plan meals in advance. Children benefit from meal planning in more ways than having good meals every night. They will also see firsthand the tools needed to get and maintain control of their money by developing a well thought out budget. Your children will also learn the value of money, when to spend, and when to save.

Have your children accompany you to the store and help you find the items on the list, figure out the specials, and calculate the total price of the groceries. This may make the shopping process a bit longer than if you did it by yourself, but your kids will learn a lot about economics and the value of a dollar.

Won't it be nice to know that you are helping your children develop lifelong skills that will enable them to handle their money? Now, that's incentive!

Strategy Sessions

Step One - Gather Your Favorite Recipes

Even planning takes planning. And, as with any new project, the hardest part is getting started.

Grab a notebook and a pen, or open your favorite word processing program, and start with a list. This will be a list of all of the things you like to cook and your family likes to eat. Get out your favorite tried-and-true recipes and cookbooks. You may want to use categories like Main Dishes, Rice, Pasta, Potatoes, Vegetables, Salads, Fruits, Breads, Desserts, and so on. If necessary you can subdivide the Main Dish category into Chicken, Beef, Beans, Soup, and so on. This may make it easier when chicken goes on sale to turn right to your chicken recipes while planning your meals.

The next step is to go through your list and highlight all of the dishes that are budget friendly. These highlighted items will be placed on a new list. The new list is your Master List. Rib Eye Steak and Grilled Shrimp will not be on the Master List. Oven fried chicken, all your favorite casseroles, bean soups and stews, ground meat dishes, favorite veggies, homemade breads and desserts will take center stage.

If your Master List is somewhat skimpy don't despair. Later in this guide, you will find several good tasting, well-tested, family-friendly recipes that will fill up your bellies while going easy on your wallet. Take a look and make a list of new recipes you see that you would like to try, and plan to use them along with family favorites. If they turn out to be winners, add them to your Master List.

Be careful, though when adding new foods to the family diet. An entire meal made up of new foods is likely to meet with disapproval from the family. Instead, try serving a single new dish in a meal that is full of familiar favorites. The new item will be associated with well favored dishes and is more likely to be accepted. You know your family's likes and dislikes better than anyone else. If you know everyone hates liver, then don't try to make it acceptable to them. Buying food just because it's budget-friendly when you know your family won't eat it is a waste of money.

Once you get your list of favorite foods together and your Master List written up, you'll start planning your meals according to your lifestyle. Whether you plan your meals each day, each week, or each month, don't forget about breakfast, lunch and snacks.

If you have school age children, their school will most likely send home a lunch menu each month. Sit down with your child and decide which days they will be taking cold lunch so you can plan for their lunches when you make out your meal plan and shopping list. And don't forget about you and your spouse – what do you do for lunch? Plan for all those "little meals" to make sure your family stays within the food budget.

Just in case this is beginning to seem like a lot trouble, let me encourage you not to give up yet. This activity may take some time at first, but it will save you so much time in the long run that it is clearly time well spent. The next step is to determine which method of meal planning best suits your family's lifestyle and budget.

Step Two - Choose A Meal Planning Method

Meals are eaten whether we plan them or not. But, by taking the time to plan our meals in advance, we control the cost, nutritional content, and the time it takes to put meals on the table.. Your meal planning method should fit your lifestyle, your family's needs, tastes, and budget. It's the only way to turn 1,092 meals a year into a manageable task. Time to sit down again with your notepad and take a good look at how to best attack your plan.

Week At A Time

This is probably one of the most common plans that families use. Weekly planning is a relatively flexible method because you can alter it easily when needed to fit your family's schedule each week. For example, later in this guide we'll discuss short-cut cooking, which combines prepared food and fresh ingredients. If your family has an extremely busy week, plan several of these short-cut meals in your weekly menu.

Week At A Time Based On Sales

With this method, you'll start planning your meals according to what is on sale at the grocery store each week. Start by looking through the store's weekly ads, either in the newspaper or at the grocery store's website, and cross-reference those sale items with the ingredients you need for the meals on your list. If the store is running a sale on chicken, you may want to buy several packs and plan on having a couple chicken dishes that you have on your list. If spaghetti, tacos, and chili are on your favorite foods list, look for ground beef sales and put those meals on the plan for the week.

This method requires a little bit of concentrated time to browse through the sales, but it can be fun, sort of like a treasure hunt! You will need to have a little shopping savvy to use this method. Knowing a good sale is important, and knowing when not to buy is important, too.

For instance, seasonal items and loss leaders are usually the best deals. Loss leaders are meats and produce that the market puts on sale at or below their own price. The reason they drop the price so drastically is these items are used as bait designed to get a little of your impulse buying money. The markets hope that you'll stop in for their huge sale on strawberries and pick up some sugar and whipped topping, both of which happen to be priced higher than normal this week. They may advertise hot dogs for the 4th of July and then mark up all of the ketchup, mustard and buns. Around Thanksgiving, turkeys may be offered at give-away prices, but cranberries are double what they will be in another 2 weeks, potatoes have tripled in price and stuffing is 50¢ more than it is during the summer months.

Your job as a consumer is to be aware of these pitfalls and sidestep them. Having a meal plan gives you a mission when you go in that store. You know what your family is going to eat for the next week or month, so there is no need to fall into any impulse buying when you walk through the grocery store doors. You know what you need and you're not walking out with anything else.

Month Or Fortnight At A Time

This method will require you pick your recipes out and get your grocery list ready for an extended period of time. This may suit you if you are paid monthly or bi-weekly. You will shop at intervals throughout the month in order to maintain the quality of the fresh ingredients required for your meals, and to take full advantage of weekly supermarket sales. You know what you've got planned in advance, so if an ingredient goes on sale today for something you're cooking two or more weeks from now, you can buy it now and save. It takes immediate advantage of weekly supermarket sales and allows adaptations for seasonal abundance.

While this method requires more planning time initially, it is done at fewer intervals. The total time used is much less than the weekly sale-based method. Planning a fortnight or month at a time can also be arranged to accommodate store advertisements and sales, and it can make use of the food you already have on hand.

One Night At A Time

This is the method that takes the least forethought. It provides the most control over waste and the opportunity to use up leftovers. Plan at least the dinner and lunch you intend to serve the next day. You'll develop your grocery list by shopping your own refrigerator and pantry first, then make a scheduled trip to the grocery store when necessary, but not in a panic now because you've got a plan.

This method is the best way to make use of leftovers and seasonal abundance. You'll need some time to think about the contents of your refrigerator, freezer, and pantry and what you feel like cooking the next day.

Perishables are the first thing to be used up. Check out the fresh veggies and meats that have spent the week unappreciated in your refrigerator drawers. This method is almost like a jig-saw puzzle. Perishables are the corner and edge pieces of the puzzle; the anchors so to speak. You arrange them first, and then fill in the blanks with pantry and freezer items. This thought process should happen fairly quickly once you get the feel for it. At first it may take as long as 20 minutes to wrap your brain around the process, but soon it will become second nature. You'll face problems like bumper zucchini crops, turkey leftovers in huge quantities, and cupboards that at first glance seem empty. Don't despair. You have a vested interest in making this plan work. Before long you'll be able to plan for tomorrow without any trouble.

Some people work best if they write their plan down on paper, others are able to keep it in their brains without losing it. I recommend writing it down, especially at the beginning. This makes it concrete and tangible and less likely to get lost in your busy day.

Rotating Menus On A Regular Basis

This method is probably the most expensive, but also the least time consuming. Rotating menus are ideal for people who are extremely pressed for time. Take the Master List that you've already prepared; go over it again and make sure that all of the meals use foods that are consistently low cost and easily obtainable. Pair up main dishes with side dishes, breads and fruits. Create a total of 10 to 20 meals. Type or write up your menus and then use them as the basis for your grocery list. Prepare and serve the menus one after the other. When you have used up all of your menus, go back to the beginning and repeat them.

If you like to do Once-A-Month-Cooking, this system is perfect for you. Casseroles, Chili, and Soups can be prepared in quantity and frozen for later use.

Crockpots can also be used to good advantage with this method.

If your family has some very finicky eaters, this may be the best method to use. You may only be able to come up with 10 to 20 dishes that your picky eaters will eat! This method limits variety, but your finicky eaters don't want any variety, or surprises.

And, since you are so familiar with each meal, this is a time saver, as well. You can prepare the meals quickly, or make and freeze several batches at once to spend the least amount of time in the kitchen at mealtime.

Freezer Cooking

If you have ample freezer space, you may want to consider “freezer cooking,” which is also known as “bulk cooking” and “once a month cooking”. In this form of meal planning, you'll use your list to plan your meals for a whole month and complete a month's cooking during one weekend, freezing the entrees.

We'll discuss this method in more detail later in this guide. This method can work well if you simply don't have time at night to even prep a meal that you have planned. Quick meals that simply need to be taken out of the freezer and heated up may be the answer for you.

Keeping Track Of Your Meal Plan

Now that you have developed your plan, you'll need to keep it handy. Whether you are a notepad kind of person or a computer spreadsheet fanatic, your plan is most effective when it's visible to the whole family. Personally, a menu tacked on the refrigerator is perfect for most people.

Whether you plan for the week or month, it's important to have a quick reference just in case you forgot one little ingredient, or need to make changes for emergencies. You may want to keep a copy in your purse as well, just in case you forget what you are having while you are out and about and want to double-check.

A Sample Meal Plan

Here we've taken some of our family's favorite recipes and developed a meal plan for one week. In this example, I'm assuming that the kids are off school all week, so we will need lunches at home. I've included a bigger meal for Sunday, using leftover chicken for the next night's meal.

Also, you'll see several meals that include rice. The trick here is to cook up a large batch for the first meal, enough to fix the remaining meals, and store the cooked rice to use later.

You'll also see desserts are served on nights that are less hectic for our family.

Some days you may have enough leftovers to eliminate the planned lunch meal. Some days breakfast may run into lunch, making one or the other meal unnecessary.

You, of course, will develop your own meal plan to suit your family's schedule and tastes, but I wanted to give you just a little something to whet your appetite.

Please scroll down to the next page to see the menu.

Day	Breakfast	Lunch	Dinner
Sunday	Homemade Waffles Any-Berry Syrup	Fruit Smoothie	Easy Steam Roasted Chicken Real Mashed Potatoes Broccoli in Cheese Sauce Apple Crisp
Monday	Rice Pancakes	Classic Macaroni Salad	Company Chicken Casserole
Tuesday	Honey or Maple Syrup Granola	Vegetables Lo Mein	Impossible Cheeseburger Pie
Wednesday	Cheese Pancakes	Pigs in a Blanket	Stuffed Green Peppers Quick & Easy Garlic Bread Sticks
Thursday	Hot Rice Cereal	Cheesy Broiler Snack	Italian Beans & Rice Cheese Puffs
Friday	Peanut Butter Bread	Banana & Carrot Salad	5 Can Bean Soup Savory Mixed Greens Honey Oatmeal Pie
Saturday	Quick Cinnamon Rolls	Chick Pea Hummus with veggies and crackers	Pulled Pork Sandwiches in the Crockpot Three Bean Salad Fudge Brownie Cookies

Tactics And Tips For Executing Your Meal Plan

Making The Shopping List

Once you have your new meal plan written down, it's time to make your grocery list.

Start by making a list of the main food items you will need for the meals. For example, if you have several meals that require hamburger, write out how many total pounds of hamburger you will need.

Once you have written out the list of ingredients you are going to need to prepare your meals for the week (or month), start looking through your refrigerator, freezer, and pantry to see what you already have on hand. As you figure out which items you already have in the house, cross those items off your shopping list.

Performing this "item check" is also a good time to check up on staple items, such as flour and sugar. Add the items you find yourself running low to your grocery list. Taking the time to perform this simple step will save you money, as you won't be wasting money on things you already had at home. When you routinely look for things you need before you head to the store, you'll be more likely to use food items up before they go past the expiration date.

Navigating The Grocery Store

Here are just a few tips on navigating the grocery store, quickly and easily.

Try to go to the store on weekdays during the early morning or late afternoon. The store will be busiest during the standard lunch time hours of 12 p.m. – 2 p.m., after 5 p.m., and during the weekend.

The freshest items, such as fruit, vegetables, meat, seafood, and dairy items, will be found around the outside aisles of the store.

The inside aisles will contain the packaged food.

If you are going to try the bulk cooking method of meal planning, you will be buying a lot of food during your trip to the grocery store. Ask older children, your spouse, or a friend to go with you and steer the extra carts.

Stick to your list! Grocery stores lure people in with sales, special offers, and other marketing ploys. It doesn't matter if you get a great deal on an item if your family won't eat it or it puts you over your budget.

Organizing Your Food Storage

If it's been awhile since you cleaned out your refrigerator, freezer, or pantry, you may want to do that the day before you go shopping. Having everything organized will make your meal preparation so much quicker and easier. Once organized, stick to it and you'll gain yourself a whole lot of time and sanity by not having to dig for food items when you need them at dinnertime.

Start with your refrigerator and freezer. Check for expiration dates first and throw out anything past its date. If an item isn't expired, but no one is ever going to eat it, throw it out. Unopened items can be donated to a local food bank.

Group like foods together if possible. For example, store all canned foods in the same cupboard and all dry goods, such as rice and pasta in the same cupboard. Keep drink mixes, coffee, and tea in the same area and keep breakfast cereals, breakfast bars and other breakfast items grouped together. When you want something, you'll know right where to go to get it without wasting your valuable time.

If you pack a lot of lunches, designate a "lunch" shelf or cupboard. Place lunch bags, Ziploc bags, and any lunch food that can be stored in a cupboard in the same place. Now it's a snap to pack those lunches. Just open the lunch cupboard, grab your lunch stuff and start packing. Of course, you'll need to walk over to the fridge to grab meats, cheeses, jellies, fruits, and so forth, but having the majority of the items in one place will save you a lot of time.

Prep Work In Advance Of Meal Day

Doing some prep work when you get home from the grocery store will save you time and make getting your meals on the table a lot easier.

Wash and chop vegetables when you get home from the store. If your veggies are in the fridge and ready to use, you'll be more likely to use them. Proper storage will also keep them fresher for a longer period of time. Different vegetables have different storage needs.

If you are be using the short-cooking cooking method, such as buying a rotisserie chicken, cut the chicken up into portions when you get home from the store. For instance, if you are going to want a portion of it thinly sliced for fajitas and another portion cubed for a casserole and yet another portion shredded for chicken salad, do this as soon as possible. The next day you may be in a rush, and instead of using the chicken as planned because it's not already cut up, you end up picking dinner up at the drive through, which defeats the whole purpose of meal planning.

Short-Cut Cooking

Short-cut cooking is a way of preparing foods quickly and easily by combining prepared food with fresh ingredients. This allows you to take advantage of the convenience of fresh food, while still enjoying the flavor and health benefits of fresh food.

This method is also growing in popularity, and you are most likely preparing some of your meals this way without even thinking about it.

Have you ever bought a rotisserie chicken from the market and made your own side dishes for dinner?

Or, have you ever bought a pre-made potato or pasta salad from the deli to serve with the entrée you've had simmering in the slow cooker all day?

Well, then you are already familiar with this type of meal preparation. If your family is going to have an unusually busy week, try planning a few short-cut meals ahead of time. This way, you can go to the grocery store once, have all the food on had during the week, and get dinner on the table in a hurry.

Plan For Your Leftovers

The term “leftovers” can inspire thoughts of turkey sandwiches, turkey soup, and turkey casseroles that fill the days after Thanksgiving. Leftovers do not have to be boring, and the simple mention of the word doesn’t have to leave your family running for cover. In fact, planning for “leftovers” ahead of time can make your meal planning for the week a lot easier.

If you are a busy mom, you know how hard it can be to come up with ideas for 3 meals a day, 7 days a week. In this sub-method of meal planning, you can look at your week and create meals that play off of each other.

Freezer Cooking - The Ultimate Time Saver

What Is Freezer Cooking?

The concept of creating a month's worth of meals in one weekend is known by several different names, such as "freezer cooking," "bulk cooking" and "once a month cooking". There is no doubt that this method of cooking requires a lot of planning and a lot of effort. But if you can devote just two days to cooking, you can feed your family for an entire month.

Just imagine how stress-free the next few weeks will be, when you don't have to worry about what to serve for dinner. You'll be able to serve your family a great tasting, home-cooked meal each night, and the best part is that the meal has already been prepared. All you'll need to do is pop it in the oven.

As you can imagine, bulk cooking calls for bulk shopping. If you have ever been to a warehouse store, you know how much money you can save by buying in bulk. In the past, buying food in such large quantities may have been daunting. You may have wondered if you were ever going to use all that food before it went bad. With freezer cooking, you can shop without worry. When you get home, you are going to assemble all those meals and freeze them.

The Cooking Day

Your cooking day has arrived! Here are some helpful hints to get you through your big day.

Get up early and start out by gathering and cleaning your small appliances, such as your crock-pot(s), mixer, food processor, blender, rice steamer, etc. These small appliances can really help you speed up the cooking process.

Clear off as much counter space as possible. You'll need lots of space to cook, chop, and so forth. And yes, those slow cookers will come in handy, but is it possible to set them up on a table in the dining room or laundry room to save on counter space?

Next, start preparing the meats, as these take the longest to cook. Investing in more than one slow cooker can ease this process. Between your oven and a couple of slow

cookers, you'll be able to roast several chickens, pot roasts, pork roasts, and hams throughout the day.

While your meat is cooking, start chopping your vegetables. It's a good idea to look through all your recipes ahead of time and tally how much of each item you'll need. For instance, let's say you looked over your recipes and you need 7 cups of chopped onion total. It will be a lot easier to chop all the onion at once and have it ready to use then to keep going back to chopping onions throughout the cooking process.

Once your veggies are chopped, start preparing any miscellaneous items, such as sauces, pasta, and rice.

Save time by maintaining the "do it once" attitude all day – when you start browning your ground beef, brown all the ground beef you'll need that day.

After your meat has been cooked, start dividing it up into the portion sizes you will need for your meals. For example, if you are planning to have chicken fajitas twice that month and need two separate one pound portions of white meat, separate them from the rest of chicken and place them into freezer containers or freezer bags. When the designated fajita night rolls around, you can thaw a portion and simply add fajita seasoning and fresh veggies.

If you are planning to make barbecue pork sandwiches, shred your cooked pork roast and divide it into portions, just as you did with the chicken. Then, add your barbecue sauce and freeze your portions. When it's time to make the sandwiches, simply thaw out a portion overnight and the next day you can put it into the slow cooker and let it simmer all day.

Now, it is time to start assembling your casserole-type meals. You are not going to actually cook your casseroles, just put them together. No one wants to eat a twice-baked casserole.

For instance, if you were going to make 3 lasagnas for the month, you would take out your lasagna pans and line them with enough foil so that you can bring the foil up over the sides and cover the lasagna when you are done assembling it. Once you have lined your pan, you'll start assembling the lasagnas as you normally would, wrap them in the foil and freeze.

Storage & Reheating Tips

Stock up on aluminum foil, jumbo sized plastic storage bags, and both gallon and quart sized plastic freezer bags.

To make the most of your freezer space, try to freeze your foods as flatly as possible. You will be able to stack them on top of each other and fit more food into your freezer. If you don't have a deep freeze, try bulk cooking in two-week inventories.

As described earlier in the "assembling casseroles" tip, you'll line the casserole dishes with enough aluminum foil to come up over the sides of the dish. After the casserole is assembled, bring the foil up and cover the casserole tightly, and then wrap it in a second freezer bag. Once the casserole is frozen, remove it from the outer bag, pop the frozen casserole out of the dish, and place the aluminum foil wrapped casserole back into the freezer bag. When it is time to cook the casserole, remove it from the freezer and place in the same baking dish to thaw. Once thawed, take it out of the freezer bag and cook. Since it is lined with the aluminum foil, clean up will be a breeze!

Make it a point to label each freezer bag. You can write the name of the entrée and the reheating instructions on a piece of paper and stick it inside the bag, on top of the aluminum foil covered casserole or write the instructions on the bag with a permanent marker. Another idea is to print out the information on packing slip labels ahead of time and just peel and stick as you cook and freeze your items.

Keep track of the meals you have on hand by placing a magnet mounted whiteboard on your freezer door. If you add three lasagnas, two portions of chicken fajita meat, two beef stews and one ham casserole, write them on your board. As you take things out of the freezer to thaw, erase them. It can be easy to forget what you have previously made, and if you don't remember it's there, you'll never be able to use it!

Frozen soups can lose their consistency when reheated. If you make your own broth, you can definitely freeze that. Put a package of frozen chicken broth and a package of chopped cooked chicken in one jumbo storage bag and label "chicken soup". When it's time to eat the chicken soup, simply thaw the broth and chicken. Add your veggies the day you will actually eat the soup.

Pasta should always be slightly undercooked when used in a frozen entree. The pasta will finish cooking when you reheat the dish.

Some More Tips For Freezer Cooking

Partner Up

If you have a family member or friend who is interested in freezer cooking, partner up with them. It will be easier to get started when you have someone to cook with. Together, you can brainstorm new recipes, scope out the best deals at the store, and of course, share in the work.

Keep Notes

As you start freezer cooking, keep a notepad handy to jot down any notes. If you find a certain recipe works better with a different ingredient, jot it down. If you find yourself going through more quart sized freezer bags than you planned for, write it down. When you begin your meal planning for the next month, you can look back at your notes and be better prepared. Plus, you'll want to note which entrees your family loved, and which ones didn't go over as well.

Pare Down

If you find that planning and cooking your meals for a whole month is too much work for one weekend, simply pare down. Try cooking 15 entrees instead of 30. You will still have two weeks of meals ready to go. Or you can just take a weekend to make several things your family enjoys. For example, if your family loves lasagna or a certain type of casserole, make a few of them and stick them in the freezer. When you are having a busy week and need a quick dinner, simply take a lasagna out and let it thaw in the refrigerator overnight and pop it into the oven when you're ready to eat.

Ask For Help

Depending on the age of your children, they may be able to help you plan, shop, and cook. If you have an infant or toddler, you may want someone to help keep them busy while you are cooking.

Keep Trying

If your first attempt at freezer cooking doesn't quite go as planned, keep trying. With a little practice, you'll find out what works for you and what doesn't, eliminating pitfalls as you learn. Take a peek in your freezer afterwards and enjoy the sheer glory of having dinner planned and cooked for a whole month. What a great feeling!

A Few More Meal Planning Tips

Ask For Suggestions

Simply figuring out what to make for dinner can be harder than the cooking and cleaning up. It isn't easy trying to think of something that everyone will like, and that you haven't already eaten three times in the last month. If you run out of ideas for what to cook, ask your family for suggestions.

Watch Cooking Shows

Watching cooking shows and checking out the internet cooking sites can be great ways to learn new cooking methods and techniques and inspire ideas for new recipes.

Experiment And Have Fun

Preparing your family's meals doesn't have to be a chore; it can actually be quite fun. As you plan your meals, experiment with new foods, flavors, and textures. If you normally have sandwiches for lunch, try wraps instead. If your family's routine was stuck in a rut of hamburgers, hot dogs, pizza and spaghetti, break out of that routine and try something totally different.

Get Everyone Involved

One of the benefits to meal planning is that you will have more family time. Studies show that families who eat meals together are happier and more connected. Get your family involved in the process, whether it is helping you cross items off the list at the grocery store, chopping vegetables, setting the table or washing the dishes. Everyone should be doing their part!

Have Theme Nights

Since you are planning your meals and know what you will be having for dinner from one day to the next, you can get creative and have "Theme Nights". If you are going to have an Asian inspired entrée, create a fun environment by setting out chopsticks and hanging paper lanterns.

Recommended Resources

I have two quick recommendations for you if you are ready to dive into meal planning.

- 1) To learn more about freezer cooking, get my “Freezer Cooking Made Simple” Guide here:

<http://www.hillbillyhousewife.com/ebooks/freezercooking.htm>

- 2) If you want the benefits of meal planning, but just don't want to make out those weekly menus yourself, take a look at Menu Planning Central. My friend Christine does a great job making out 4 different types of menus for you and you have the option to customize those menus with her My Menu Maker software.

<http://www.MenuPlanningCentral.com>