

THE NUTRISTIC METHOD

Menu Planning Made Easy

You're busy, busy and the thought of having to plan out meals may feel like just one more chore to add to your already long list of things to do. I know!

To be honest, it has not always been my all-time favorite thing to do either. What I found, though, is that taking time to plan for meals each week – and writing out a grocery list – means that I ultimately **save TIME. And it means less STRESS.**

Menu planning saves time because first you know “what’s for dinner” and you won’t have to run to the grocery store as often.

It saves money because eating out is so much more expensive than preparing meals at home. It also means less food waste because you’ve only bought the items you need to prepare your meals.

Finally, planning meals reduces stress because you have a solid plan for your week, and you won’t have to rack your brain at the last minute to figure out the age-old question, “What’s for dinner?”

Quality Control

Choosing ingredients from the grocery store gives you more control over the quality. More and more supermarkets are offering more organic options and a wide variety of foods and brands from which to choose.

When we eat out, the food usually contains higher sodium levels than what we make at home. And restaurant prepared food typically uses lower quality oils like soybean, GMOs foods are used as the norm and MSG is often added or hidden, along with other controversial ingredients.

This doesn't mean you shouldn't enjoy eating out, but when you select and prepare your own food knowing exactly what is included in the dishes you make, you're able to better control the quality and nutritional value of your meals.

This is a huge help with blood sugar control since **YOU are in control** of the food, and you actually know what's in it. And you're likely to have more nutrient rich food.

Get Organized

Pick a day to be your menu-planning day. For me, that means Saturday or Sunday, but choose the day that works best for you.

Consider whether you will be meal planning and shopping on the same day or a different day. Sometimes I like to plan the menu one day and then do the shopping the next day. Before I start, I like to ask for input from my family to see what they want for dinner during the upcoming week.

How do you like to plan your meals?

What works for you? Do you prefer to look through cookbooks, existing recipe cards, or find recipes online or maybe a combination of all three? Does your family have a favorite meal that they like to have each week?

Start with what you know so you don't feel overwhelmed. If you already have a recipe box with a lot of recipes, start there.

Find 5 or 6 you want to make for the week and go with that. You can add to the repertoire little by little. If you typically eat out most nights, maybe start with planning just three dinners this week and increase your menu planning from there.

Consider the nights that may be typically hectic with activities, meetings or any other obligations you may have.

Then think about what the easiest meals would be to make on those nights. For me, that means something in the handy dandy slow cooker.

Or you may want to double a recipe and have it ready to reheat on a second night. Another option is to double up your chicken for one dish and set half aside to add to a salad as your main meal on another night.

After you've figured out your meals for the week, it's time to create your grocery list. Be sure to check your fridge and pantry first to see what you already have and then make the list of what you need.

Okay, so you've figured out which nights are busy, you have your menus for the week, and you have your grocery shopping list all set.

You'll want to be sure to write down your menu plan for the week, so you and your family remember what you're having each night. Post it on the fridge or somewhere else you can see it easily.

How do you like to store your recipes - on your computer? Print them out and keep them in a recipe box or folder?

I started keeping a pocketed folder in the kitchen with the recipes I plan to make that week, so I know right where they are and can find them easily. I save them on the computer, then print them out and put them in the folder so I have them handy when I'm ready to start cooking.

If you use the Weekly Menu Plan provided, you can always refer back to it later. Perhaps you label the one you create this week "Week 1 Meals." then label next week's "Week 2 Meals" and so on.

This way, after a few weeks, you'll have quite a few menu plans to pick from and it gets easier. Then you can add to the list by trying 1 new recipe every week or every 2 weeks. Place these menu plans in a folder labeled "menu plans" so you can find them easily.

Before you know it, you'll have a lot of recipe options and meal planning becomes even easier.

Bonus tips

- **Cook once, eat twice.** Plan to make double or triple what you would normally make for dinner, so you have leftovers for lunches (for adults as well as kids) and/or another dinner.
- **Cook grains, like rice, ahead of time** for the week, then refrigerate and use them later in the week (add a little water when reheating). Most grains will keep for 3-5 days in the fridge.
- **Be sure to have food defrosted** if you're using any frozen items like meat, chicken, fish, etc. Check what you need for the next day, the night before.
- **Chop your veggies** on the weekend or the night before to prep ahead of time and place in storage containers in the fridge. Also, decide which frozen veggies you can use instead of fresh.
- **Make any marinades**, dressings, spice mixes or sauces in advance to save time on those busier nights.

If you typically eat dinner out twice a week, and you have 20 recipes to prepare at home, that's about four weeks' worth of meals without repeating a meal – not bad! You can add more to the list as you go to expand your base of options.

Even if you start out just planning THREE of your meals each week, it will make a difference. I feel so much less stress when I know I'm ready for the week and I have what I need to make healthy meals.

Taking 30 minutes to plan your meals will save you much more time and energy than that in the long run.

Once you start implementing a weekly meal plan, you'll notice you feel less stressed over the dinnertime rush, and you may just have a better answer to the question "What's for dinner?"

To-Do

Menu planning experiment

For this coming week, take a look at the calendar and see which nights you'll be cooking. Decide which nights you'll need a quick, easy meal and which nights you'll have more time to prepare dinner. Then start your menu planning.

What new recipes have you been meaning to try?

- Write out the menu for each day's meals.
- Make a list of the ingredients you need to purchase, double-checking your pantry to ensure you have the spices or staples needed.
- Decide which day you'll go grocery shopping.