WLG 155

WestVirginiaUniversity
EXTENSION SERVICE

# Cooking for One

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## Educational Objectives

1. Understand the benefits of cooking for one.
2. Gain strategies to plan meals and save money.
3. Learn how to safely store food in the freezer or pantry.

Being motivated to cook for one person can be challenging, but there are many benefits. Meals prepared at home are typically more nutritious and less expensive than purchased meals. You can eat your favorite foods and experiment with new foods, techniques and recipes. You may be able to afford an occasional treat, like out-of-season fruit or a more expensive cut of meat. If you follow a special diet, you can accommodate any changes more easily.

## Nutritional Needs

Meeting your nutritional requirements is important, regardless of your household size. MyPlate is a guide developed by the United States Department of Agriculture to help adults choose a healthier diet. It emphasizes eating a variety of foods, while limiting fat and sugar intake. All food groups should be included in the daily diet to ensure good health. The guidelines are simple:

- Half your plate should be fruits and vegetables.
- Half your grains should be whole.
- Dairy products should be low-fat.
- Protein food choices should be varied.

Eating a variety of foods in moderation will help you obtain the nutrients you need and maintain a healthy weight. Remember, no one food or food group is more important than the other.

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## Enhance Purchased Meals

Prepared meals are available in the grocery freezer section or hot foods bar. Restaurants and delis provide take-out meals. These options can be fine but they may contain more fat or sodium than you want. Cooking at home can help control these factors. You can also adjust the seasoning to your preference. An added bonus is that cooking at home can be less expensive.

While cooking at home can be rewarding for some people, not everyone enjoys it. You might consider enhancing the take-out or prepared option with some personal cooking.

If you prepare a main dish, you might find a prepared side dish from the deli or choose items from the salad bar at the grocery. You can cook a fresh vegetable to accompany a frozen meal. Fresh fruit provides a sweet ending to your meal.

## Batch Cooking

One popular strategy is called, "cook once, eat twice," or "batch cooking." Instead of scaling back, cook a full recipe. Eat one serving now and freeze the rest for later. This will save time, money and clean up by freezing soups, chili, pasta dishes and extra vegetables. When you need a quick meal or time is limited, pull one of your prepared meals out of the freezer, or plan the use of your frozen meal and thaw it in the refrigerator overnight for warming the next day.

A list of meals available in your freezer can serve as a reference when planning the week's meals.

Keep in mind that the freezer section of a refrigerator exposes food to more temperature changes (opening the door more frequently) which produces ice crystals on food. Cooked meals stored in the freezer need to be used before the quality deteriorates. This depends on the food, but generally a limit of one month is a good standard.

## Planned-overs

Having extra food at the end of a meal can encourage overeating or result in food waste. But having planned leftovers can help you efficiently use extra food. Careful planning will allow you to prepare food today and eat it later. For example, a beef roast on Monday can become hot roast beef sandwiches on Tuesday and beef stew on Wednesday.

When storing leftovers, pay attention to food safety. Separate out extra food before serving. Refrigerate or freeze perishable foods in food-safe containers within two hours. Check food storage charts for specific recommendations on length of storage (see list under "references"). Remember to be aware of the expiration dates of all food items and leftovers – fresh food does not last forever!

You may want to freeze a complete meal. There are many options for freezer-safe containers or divided plates suitable for frozen meals. A major objective in packaging is to keep air from the food and minimize moisture loss. A vacuum sealer can be worthwhile if you plan to use it often, but freezer bags, foil and freezer paper work well, too, when used properly.

Some foods can be frozen individually and then packaged. For example, French toast slices can be frozen on a cookie sheet until solid. Then wrap each slice individually or slide into a small freezer bag. Remove any excess air and package in a larger bag that is well labeled.

When freezing, be sure to use bags or containers designed for freezer use and label each container with the contents, date and other necessary information, such as additional cooking instructions. Freezing is not recommended for some ingredients, like mayonnaise, yogurt or puddings, due to textural changes. Foods do not become unsafe during freezing but they may diminish in quality.

## Save Money When Shopping and Cooking

If your freezer space is limited, or you prefer to not freeze extra meals, preparing smaller amounts of food at each meal is an option. This will still help cut back on food waste and therefore save money.

Purchase only the amount you will need this week, and let your weekly meal plan guide you. Use the following ideas to help you prepare smaller meals.

- Purchase smaller quantities of foods and ingredients at the grocery store. Some fruits and vegetables are available in single serving cans.
- Some grocery stores have bins of bulk food. You can purchase exactly the amount you want, and although it may be more expensive per pound, you are saving money by not purchasing more than you will use.
- If you cannot go food shopping frequently for fresh produce, purchase wisely and strategically. Don't buy more than you can use before it spoils. Use perishable vegetables, like lettuce, cucumbers and tomatoes, first; save the heartier ones, like cabbage, carrots and potatoes, for later.
- Ask the produce manager for assistance in selecting a smaller amount if you can't easily break it apart.
- Share grocery shopping with a friend or family member. If you can't shop together, consider a system of sharing large quantities. If 10 pounds of potatoes are on sale, split the potatoes and the cost. A "buy one, get one free" offer isn't a bargain if the extra item isn't used so share it.
- Try to purchase fruits at varying stages of ripeness. Apricots, bananas, cantaloupe, kiwi, peaches and pears continue to ripen after purchase if they are left at room temperature. Refrigerate ripe fruit for longer storage or freeze it.
- Frozen berries and bananas can be used in smoothies or cooked puddings. Frozen grapes are a great snack.
- Buy frozen vegetables in bags. You can pour out the amount you need; seal the bag (a rubber band around it works well) and return to the freezer for next time.

- Prepare only part of the package of a dry mix (such as pudding, cake, quick breads). To divide a mix, stir the mix and measure it into two portions. When you prepare half of a mix, reduce the other ingredients by half also. Be sure to mark the remaining portion in the package appropriately.
- Instead of baking a cake, make cupcakes. Wrap the extras individually and freeze in a large freezer bag. Take out just one when you want a sweet ending to a meal. You won't need to add frosting if you serve it with fruit.

- Bake twice as many potatoes as you need. Leftover baked potatoes make delicious home fries, potato soup or scalloped potatoes the next day.
- Visit the in-store salad bar for prepared vegetables when small amounts are needed for salads, omelets or stir-fries.
- As a reminder of food to be used in the refrigerator or freezer, keep a list nearby.

***Activity:*** Make your mealtime a special time and create a pleasant background. Listen to relaxing music and use your fancy dishes and glasses. Add a colorful placemat or centerpiece and light some candles. Perhaps you have a friend who also likes to cook and is willing to share meals.

***Activity:*** Think about forming a supper club with other singles from work, church, your

family or neighborhood. You could sponsor an occasional covered-dish dinner or other arrangement to share the cooking duties and enjoy each other's company.

***Activity:*** Ask participants to share ideas for ways to shop or cook for one, or their favorite planned-over tip.

## References


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