



7 Secrets to Easy Meal Planning

1. Gather Family Favorites

There's no need to try a new recipe every night. Instead, pick the dishes that please everyone and keep the recipes in a special spot, like a note card box on the kitchen counter. Build a collection of about 12-15 recipes and, depending on how many nights you plan to cook that week, pull about five to build your grocery list for the week. Get kids in on it by letting each child pick one night's meal.

2. Keep Sides Simple

On each recipe in your file box, make a note about preferred side dishes. You don't always have to serve peas and mashed potatoes with pork tenderloin, but it's good to know that those are a big hit and guaranteed to please if you're pressed for time.

3. Be Realistic About Portions

Does your ziti casserole for Tuesday serve 10? Think about if you'll take leftovers to lunch or serve a repeat dinner sometime over the weekend. Having leftovers for future dinners or work lunches will save more time later—simply divide any extra into single-serving containers during cleanup and store in the fridge with a fork or spoon for easy grab-and-go meals.

4. Make a Grocery List

Once you've pulled the recipes and selected some sides, make a grocery list. If you clip coupons, attach them to the list for easy access at checkout.

5. Limit Trips to the Store

Decide on a day to do your shopping (Saturday might be best for working cooks, but Monday may work better for stay-at-home moms) and try to hit the aisles before noon—the store will be less crowded so you'll get out faster. Go once and get what you need for the week to save yourself after-work dashes.

6. Leave the Kids at Home

Plan meals and shop for the ingredients when you have a minute to yourself. You'll think clearer, move faster, and avoid a lot of kid-oriented impulse purchases like sugary cereal or candy at the checkout. If you do have the kids in tow, make sure everyone's eaten before you head into the store to save yourself from checking out with a half-empty box of crackers. Again.

7. Organize Checkout

Feed items onto the belt by category. No need to over-think the process, but by pairing cold items together, you'll keep them chilled during the ride home and know exactly which items need priority unpacking. Grouping rice, crackers, or canned goods together also expedites the pantry or cabinet restocking.