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Shopping for Health: A Menu for One[1]

Morgan Denhard and Wendy Dahl[2]

In today's busy world, many Americans find themselves cooking meals for one. Older adults and college students alike face the challenge of making meal preparation a priority when no one else is depending on them to create a balanced meal. Whether you pop a dish into the microwave after a busy day or spend time cooking a special meal for yourself, shopping for and preparing healthy, low-cost meals for one can be easy and enjoyable with just a little bit of planning.

Figure 1. Shopping for healthy, low-cost meals for one can be easy and enjoyable with just a little bit of planning.
Credit: Thinkstock.com

Making Your Menu

Taking the time to plan your meals for the upcoming week can help you avoid relying on take-out or convenience foods, which are generally less nutritious and more costly than meals you can prepare at home (Drewnowski and Darmon 2005). If you are short on ideas, think about new tweaks you can add to your favorite meals, or look for ideas in magazines or online resources. Your local grocery store may have an online database of recipes or a registered dietitian (RD) available in the store to help you create a menu for the week.

To ensure that your meals are well-balanced, use the US Department of Agriculture's (USDA) MyPlate symbol to remind you to include grains, protein foods, fruits, vegetables, and dairy in your meals. When creating your meal idea, ask yourself, **"Does this meal include a food from each group?"** If it does not, find a way to add it in, or make sure you eat a food from the missing group at your next meal or snack.

Shopping for Fruits and Vegetables

Buy Frozen or Canned. When cooking for one person, it might be hard to use fresh produce before it spoils. Most people assume that fresh is best, but this is not always true. Canned and frozen fruits and vegetables are processed right after they are picked, so the nutrients in these foods get "locked in" by food preservation methods.

Don't Shy Away from Bulk Options. Although single serving size containers of frozen and canned fruits and veggies are very convenient, they tend to be more expensive. Try making your own "just for one" portions instead! Invest in some airtight containers or freezer bags so that after you use the amount you need, you can freeze the rest for future meals.

Be Creative. If you buy a large bag of grapes or a container of strawberries, think about ways you can add these foods to many meals. For instance, you can add blackberries to your yogurt for breakfast and to a salad for lunch. Other great fruits to add to salads are grapes, strawberries, and apple slices. If you buy more vegetables than you can eat before they start to spoil, try making a leftover vegetable soup!

Leftover Vegetable Soup

1. Take inventory of your refrigerator and retrieve the vegetables that may spoil soon. Most vegetables should be stored in the refrigerator for up to only a week.
2. In a pot, add a teaspoon of vegetable oil and some chopped onion. Once the onion has softened, add chopped garlic, carrots, and celery. You do not need to have all these ingredients, but if you do, you should add them to the pot first, and let them sauté for about five minutes.
3. Add the rest of the vegetables you have to the pot and continue to pan-fry. Good choices include broccoli, cauliflower, sweet potato, parsnips, beans, and any leafy greens.
4. After these veggies have softened, add low sodium chicken or vegetable broth, and cook for 20 minutes.

Depending on how many vegetables you have, the amount of broth you need will vary. Start with a small amount and continue to add until you reach a desired soup-like consistency.

5. Purée the soup with either a food processor or hand blender. If you prefer a chunky soup, skip this step.
6. Return the puréed vegetables to the pot. Heat for five more minutes and add your favorite herbs and spices. A publication explaining various herbs, spices, and their uses is full of tips and recipe combinations (https://ask.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/FS225). You can also add cooked pasta, beans, a sprinkle of cheese, or most anything else in your refrigerator that needs to be used. Enjoy and freeze the leftovers for a rainy day!

Shopping for Protein Foods

Choose Seafood That Will Last. The USDA recommends consuming 8 ounces of seafood each week for heart health (USDA and USDHHS 2020). However, it isn't safe to eat fresh fish that has been in the refrigerator for more than one to two days (USDA-FSIS 2021). If you are not planning to prepare fresh fish right away, select canned or frozen fish in varieties that you enjoy.

Prepare Several Servings. Skinless chicken is an easy, low-fat protein source that can be added to almost any dish, and there are lots of ways you can use it throughout the week. For example, if you bake skinless chicken breasts on Sunday, you can:

- eat one for dinner along with a whole grain and a vegetable;
- add one to a salad or sandwich for lunch;
- cut another into chunks to make a quick chicken salad using Greek yogurt, mayonnaise, or salad dressing—add a pop with some grapes or dried cranberries, or toss in a dash of curry powder and some apple chunks;
- freeze any cooked chicken that you will not use within 3 to 4 days. The next time you need chicken, it will already be prepared—all you will need to do is thaw and reheat it!

Freezing Tip: You can freeze meat and poultry in its original packaging, but since the plastic wrap is not airtight, putting it in a freezer bag or wrapping it with additional plastic wrap or foil will help to maintain a higher quality (USDA-FSIS 2013).

Seek Protein from Plant Sources. Protein is not just found in meat. Dried beans, peas, and lentils are good sources of protein and can be stored for a long time.

Shopping for Grains

Shop for Whole Grains You Enjoy. Including whole grains in your meals may help you feel more satisfied because of the higher fiber content of these foods (USDA and USDHHS 2020). The front of food packages can be deceiving, so be sure to choose only foods that are labeled "100% Whole Grain" or that list whole grain wheat, oats, rye, or corn as the first ingredient.

"Buy One, Get One Free" Deals Are Not Only for Large Households. Freezing bread greatly extends its shelf life. Shelf-stable grains like pasta and popcorn (a whole grain!) are good items to stock up on during "two for one" sales.

Freeze Perishable Grains. It is common practice to freeze bread purchased at the grocery store, but did you know you can also freeze specialty bread from the bakery? If you purchase a baguette, cut it into several pieces and double wrap them in two clear plastic bags before sealing with masking tape. Thaw to serve at room temperature, or to heat it, wrap the bread in parchment paper and foil, and place in a 400°F oven for a few minutes.

Extend Shelf Life. You can extend the shelf life of rice and cereal by storing them properly in the pantry. Keep your rice and cereal in a sealed, air-tight container after opening. Stick a post-it on the container with the expiration date from the box.

Shopping for Dairy

Always Check the Expiry Dates. When selecting milk and other dairy foods, remember to check the "sell by" date. Items located closest to the back of the shelf often have the greatest amount of time before they must be sold and used. Another option is to buy shelf-stable milk that does not require refrigeration until it is opened. Shelf-stable milk (labeled UHT) comes in single-serve sizes as well as larger containers. With shelf-stable milk, you can always have it on hand when you need it.

Be a Smart Saver. How often do you see a "10 yogurts for $10" deal at your local grocery store? Many stores will allow you to buy a smaller quantity at a reduced price. For example, four yogurts would cost $4. Ask a store assistant to be sure. If you end up buying a bunch, puncture the lids with a knife, poke a popsicle stick through the yogurt, and freeze them into high-calcium treats!

Scale It Down or Store It Safely

Many recipes are written to make 4–6 servings. It only takes a little math to reduce the yield of your recipe, and the work is made easier with the availability of online resources, http://food.unl.edu/web/fnh/reduce-recipe-size.

If you have leftovers, be aware that most are food safe for only 3–4 days in the refrigerator, or 3–4 months in the freezer (USDA-FSIS 2020). Leftover servings from dishes you prepared can be frozen in airtight containers or freezer bags. Warm food should be cooled as quickly as possible so that it does not sit for a long time at a

temperature at which bacteria can easily grow. It is not safe to leave food at temperatures between 40–140°F. It is also not safe to leave food out of refrigeration for more than 2 hours (USDA-FSIS 2021). It is not true that food needs to reach room temperature before being refrigerated. The USDA states that placing hot food directly in the refrigerator is an acceptable practice (USDA-FSIS 2020). Just be careful to avoid placing a hot dish on a cold glass shelf!

When storing foods in the refrigerator, try placing items with the shortest shelf lives in front to help you remember to eat them before they spoil. Items like jam, unopened cheese, and long-lasting produce can fill up the space in the back.

About Frozen Meals

In a pinch, you may choose to have a frozen entrée for dinner. There are so many meal options at the store that it can be overwhelming to select an entrée or brand. *A Guide to Frozen Meals* (https://ask.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/FS186) was developed as part of the *Shopping for Health* series and can help you choose an entrée that you feel good about.

Recipe to Try: Seaside Stir Fry for One

The Shopping List:

Fruits and Vegetables

- Canned or fresh pineapple
- Frozen mixed vegetables with broccoli, carrots, snap peas, etc.

Protein Foods

- Frozen shrimp (choose a package with a resealable bag so you can save the rest)

Grains

- Instant brown rice

Dairy

- Fat-free milk or yogurt

Other

- Vegetable oil (1 tsp)
- Soy sauce or stir fry sauce (2 Tbsp)
- Cornstarch (1/4 tsp)

The Recipe (adapted from Good Housekeeping):

1. Cook 1 cup of the brown rice according to instructions, in a small pot.
2. Remove about 6 to 8 of the frozen shrimp and thaw by running under cold water for about 5–10 minutes. If they still have their shells on, remove the shells after thawing, and set them aside to add to stir fry shortly.
3. Add 1 tsp. vegetable oil to skillet, then add 1 cup mixed vegetables after the pan has reached medium-hot temperature. Mix the vegetables to coat with oil and continue to cook for about 5 minutes.
4. Mix 2 Tbsp. soy sauce or stir fry sauce with ¼ tsp. cornstarch, then add to skillet along with the thawed shrimp and pineapple.
5. When shrimp become opaque, remove them from the stove and pour the stir fry on top of the brown rice on a plate.
6. Enjoy with a glass of fat-free milk or a cup of yogurt for dessert.

Other ideas...

- Switch out the protein in the recipe—prepare with cooked chicken or tofu instead of shrimp.
- Make a breakfast smoothie with the leftover pineapple, milk or yogurt, and a banana.
- Combine any leftover brown rice and stir fry. Add black beans and a dollop of light sour cream and salsa. Wrap in a whole wheat tortilla for a filling lunch or dinner.

Take Time to Enjoy Your Meals

Appreciate the hard work you put in to create a dish that looks appealing, smells good, and tastes delicious! Dine in a pleasant, comfortable atmosphere that helps you relax. Making great meals for one is a positive way to stay well. Dinner for one can be a part of the day that you look forward to and enjoy.

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[2] Morgan Denhard; Wendy Dahl, professor and Extension specialist, Department of Food Science and Human Nutrition; UF/IFAS Extension, Gainesville, FL 32611.

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