# Dinner Hacks: Meal Planning, Meal Prep, Batch Cooking, and More

Need a cure for the suppertime blues? When dinner turns into a dreaded chore, try one of these time-honored strategies to help you get back on track.

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We get it — no matter how much you love to cook, sometimes you just need to get dinner on the table, stat. When cooking starts to feel like a chore, you're spending too much money on takeout, or you've fallen into a recipe rut, it's time to step back and see if there's a better way to do dinner. Maybe you've tried meal planning, or perhaps you're intimidated by photos of perfectly-packaged bento boxes of healthy lunches on social media. If you're not sure where to start, this article is for you.

The good news is that there are many different strategies you can use to get control over your daily meals, whether your goal is to eat healthier, save money, or learn to be a better cook. The most important thing is to find a method that works for you; there's no right or wrong way to implement these strategies! Mix and match, try a "light" version of any of these tactics, and you'll be sure to find a solution to your woes. Let's take a look at some of our favorite ways to get dinner chaos under control.

## The Strategy: Meal Planning

**What is it?** At its core, meal planning is simply the act of writing down what you plan to eat for the week ahead. By spending some time on the weekend choosing your meals, you're able to build your grocery list and shop for all the ingredients, so that during the week you just open the fridge and start cooking.

There are many different ways to do meal planning, so don't feel like you have to stick 100% to your plan. Whether you schedule all 21 meals or simply choose four dinner recipes that you'll make at some point during the week, the point is simply to have ingredients and recipes at the ready, and be as flexible or regimented as you like.

**Pros** By picking your menu in advance, you avoid daily debates about what to eat for dinner, save money on groceries (and help avoid expensive takeout), and save time during the week already having your ingredients on hand. Because you pick out the recipes, you can choose meals that you know your family will eat and accommodate any dietary restrictions.

**Cons** Planning means you do need to spend some time picking out recipes, writing them down, and making your grocery list. Some people don't like the structure of meal planning because they might not be in the mood for whatever is on the menu on a given night.

**This might be for you if…**

- You're the type of person who prefers structure
- You want control over the food you and your family eat
- You're trying to save money
- You want the flexibility to do things your way

## The Strategy: Pre-set Meal Plans

**Breakfast** (264 calories)
- 1 cup nonfat plain Greek yogurt
- 1/4 cup muesli
- 1/4 cup blueberries

**A.M. Snack** (84 calories)
- 5 dried apricots

**Lunch** (335 calories)
Chickpea & Veggie Salad
- 2 cups mixed greens
- 3/4 cup veggies of your choice (try cucumbers and tomatoes)
- 1/2 cup chickpeas, rinsed
- 1/2 Tbsp. chopped walnuts
Combine ingredients and top salad with 1 Tbsp. each balsamic vinegar and olive oil

**P.M. Snack** (70 calories)
- 2 clementines

**Dinner** (434 calories)
- 1 3/4 cup Squash & Red Lentil Curry
- 1/2 cup brown rice

**What is it?** Think of these pre-set meal plans as a shortcut version of the meal planning method we described above, where you outsource the planning part. Instead of picking your own menu, you're provided with a list of recipes for the week, often with a shopping list already drawn up for you. All you have to do is buy groceries and cook. There are several types of meal plans available, including downloading a free meal plan from a food blog, paying a small subscription fee to a meal-plan provider, or having a nutritionist create a custom plan for you.

**Pros** Prescribed meal plans save you time since you don't have to find the recipes or make a shopping list. They're also a good choice if you need guidance to follow a specific diet, as you can find plans tailored to everything from weight loss or sports performance to diabetes care or Keto-friendly meals.

**Cons** If you have a lot of picky eaters in your house or don't like trying new recipes, pre-set meal plans can be challenging. It can be difficult to find a pre-made plan that doesn't include at least one or two recipes that you wouldn't choose yourself. You can always swap that recipe with something else, but then that handy pre-made shopping list is, well, not so handy.

**This might be for you if…**

- You like the idea of having a meal plan in place but don't want to spend the time making it yourself
- You want to adopt a new style of eating or stay within a particular nutritional profile

- You are an adventurous eater that likes a lot of different foods
- You don't mind someone else telling you what to eat

## The Strategy: Meal Prep and Ingredient Prep

**What is it?** Meal prepping is a broad term that can cover anything from cutting up some extra vegetables in the evening to spending your entire Sunday making casseroles and soups to reheat for dinner in the upcoming week. A classic form is to use an assembly line approach and prepare multiple packages of identical meals. Meal prepping can be used in conjunction with meal planning or used much more loosely to have a bunch of ready-to-cook meats and veggies on hand to pull together a quick improvised meal.

**Pros** Spending time on the weekend prepping either ingredients or complete meals frees up time during the week — great for busy moms who need to get dinner on the table fast in between driving kids around town to school and soccer practice. More advanced meal preppers may assemble all of their **lunches** and breakfasts in cute matching containers to quickly grab and go during the week.

**Cons** The most efficient forms of meal prep will have you eating the same thing for lunch four days straight, or might give you a giant pot of soup that you're eating a couple of nights in a row. If you like to eat something different every day or like to indulge in spontaneous food cravings, you may end up frustrated (or waste a lot of prepared food). Prepping just the ingredients can help make cooking faster, but still requires spending time in the kitchen each night during the week.

**This might be for you if…**

- You have limited time to cook during the week
- Your family members are on different schedules and need ready-made meals to reheat
- You can set aside a couple of hours on the weekend to prep food
- You and your family don't mind eating the same foods throughout the week

## The Strategy: Investment cooking

**What is it?** Investment cooking (aka big batch cooking) is technically a form of meal prep, just taken to the next level. With investment cooking, you set aside a full day to prepare 4-5 complete dishes (each of which serves 4-6 people) which you then portion out and pop in the freezer to eat in the future. 6 hours, 20 individual meals, anyone? You can make the day go by more quickly if you invite a friend over to help with the cooking and share the spoils of the day. Similarly, you can assemble all the ingredients for crockpot dinners ahead of time and freeze them for dinners that get slow-cooked while you're away instead of making pre-cooked meals that need to be reheated.

**Pros** Investment cooking allows you to get a whole bunch of cooking done at once while providing homemade meals to be eaten throughout the month. Making large quantities of food means you can take advantage of bulk (or sale) pricing on expensive items like meats.

**Cons** You'll need enough freezer space to accommodate all the meals, as well as a healthy collection of containers or freezer bags. There's also a risk that the meals will languish in your freezer for an indefinite amount of time if you don't actively plan to eat them up.

**This might be for you if...**

- You have friends or family around to help you with a day-long cooking project
- You like to be well-stocked with meals that can be reheated
- You like to buy foods in bulk at discount retailers or clubs
- You can remember to take the meals out of the freezer to defrost and cook

## The Strategy: Shortcut Cooking Hacks

**What is it?** A lot of "semi-homemade" meals can be made by using store-bought ingredients to help do part of the cooking for you. A rotisserie chicken is a classic example of an ingredient shortcut — rather than roasting your own chicken, you can buy a rotisserie chicken, remove the meat, and use it as a base for tacos, chicken casseroles, or chicken salad sandwiches. Other shortcuts include baking chicken breasts smothered with a can of store-bought salsa, or making a chicken curry dish using a canned simmer sauce and adding your own sliced peppers and onions.

**Pros** Starting with precooked meats or pre-chopped vegetables from the market can save you a significant amount of time in the kitchen while still getting a homecooked meal on the table and avoiding takeout.

**Cons** Using pre-packaged ingredients means you have less control over what goes into your food; if you are trying to avoid additives or reduce your consumption of processed foods, this might not be for you. Generally speaking, packaged ingredients cost more than making them from scratch, but they do save time.

**This might be for you if...**

- You don't mind paying a little extra to save time
- You have a grocery store nearby where you can pick up fresh ingredients
- You aren't opposed to eating packaged foods

## The Strategy: Special Appliances

**What is it?** Many home cooks swear by things like the slow cooker or pressure cooker to solve their dinner woes. Slow cookers let you toss in a pile of ingredients in the morning, turn it on, and have dinner cooking slowly through the day while you're off at work. (Want some recipe ideas? Check out our huge collection of crock pot recipes.) A pressure cooker, on the other hand, helps save time in the evening by cooking foods that would traditionally take an hour or more in as little as 10 to 20 minutes. And don't forget the freezer! Whether you're freezing half of the lasagna you just made to eat at a later date or tossing in a big bag of chopped onions to use for a future meal, having food in the deep freeze can help save time for your future self.

**Pros** By speeding up or slowing down the cooking time of your favorite recipes, you can have greater control over when dinner is served — regardless of what time you get home. These countertop devices are also easy to clean with their removable crocks, and won't heat up your kitchen on a summer day the same way an oven does.

**Cons** If you don't own one of these appliances already, there's an upfront investment to buy one. Multicookers like the Instant Pot can also have a bit of a learning curve to use. If you aren't combining the use of these appliances with some meal prepping techniques, you'll still have to spend time each day preparing the ingredients for the pot. Finally, while these appliances are great for things like stews, pot roasts, and soups, they aren't good at everything.

**This might be for you if…**

- You enjoy using cooking gadgets and have the space to store them
- You have more time to prep dinner late at night or early in the morning
- You want to prep meals for the freezer that can be safely reheated while you are away

## The Strategy: Go-to 15-minute pantry meals

**What is it?** There's not much to this strategy, but it can help out tremendously! Pick out a handful of recipes (say 4-5) that are quick, easy, and can be made with shelf-stable ingredients from your pantry. Yes, dried pasta and a jar of sauce counts, but it doesn't end there. Keep these items in stock — next time you need a last-minute dinner plan, know that one of these recipes can be whipped up in a jiffy without needing to stop at the store.

**Pros** Having a short list of "in case of emergency" meals gives you something to fall back on if you can't get to the store or end up working later than expected. Because you don't plan ahead for these recipes, it allows you to be flexible with your menu.

**Cons** Pantry items have a way of collecting dust in the cupboard if you don't actively plan to use them (I'm pretty sure I've got a can of white beans that are coming up on 3 years old now). Also, pantry recipes may not have the same nutritional qualities as fresh food; keep some bags of frozen veggies on hand to supplement these meals.

**This might be for you if...**

- You have trouble planning out your meals in advance
- Your schedule tends to change frequently
- You want a B-plan in place to avoid takeout when dinner falls through

## The Strategy: Subscription Meal Kits

**What is it?** If ready-made meal plans are the outsourced version of meal planning, then subscription meal kits are the outsourced alternative to meal prep. Typically, you subscribe to a meal kit service, go online to pick your meals for the week, and then a box shows up at your door with perfectly portioned amounts of all the ingredients that you need to make your meal. There are a variety of companies that offer these services, some of which have options to accommodate diets such as vegetarian or grain-free.

**Pros** You can reduce **food waste** by only getting the amount of spices or vegetables needed to make your meal. Meal kits can also be a good solution for newer cooks who want to get some cooking instruction while making dinner. There are often heavily discounted or free meals available to new subscribers who are interested in checking out a service.

**Cons** Most services offer a fairly limited menu of items to choose from each week, so you may not find meals that everyone in your household is excited to eat. While the cost is typically less than eating out at a restaurant, it's more expensive than cooking from scratch. While many of these services have recycling programs, there's often quite a bit of packaging to deal with after unloading your box.

**This might be for you if...**

- You don't mind spending extra money to save yourself a trip to the store
- You enjoy cooking (and eating) new recipes
- You don't mind dealing with the packaging afterwards

***Want to learn more?*** Check out our other **meal planning** articles for tips, tricks, and recipes.

Meal-planning Kitchen Hacks Dinner