

Meal Prep for Beginners

Simple Sunday prep that saves time and cuts food waste



Why Meal Prep Saves Time & Money

If you're a busy parent juggling work, kids, and household responsibilities, meal prep can be your secret weapon for reclaiming precious time during the week. When you dedicate just one hour on Sunday to planning and preparing your meals, you unlock a cascade of benefits that transform your entire week. No more standing in front of the fridge at 6 PM wondering what to make for dinner. No more expensive takeout orders because you're too exhausted to cook. And most importantly, no more guilt about throwing away spoiled groceries that never made it into a meal.

The financial impact is equally impressive. The average American family throws away \$1,500 worth of food every year, according to the USDA. When you meal prep, you buy exactly what you need and use everything you purchase. You'll also find yourself driving past those tempting drive-thru restaurants because you know there's a delicious, ready-to-heat meal waiting at home. Parents who commit to consistent meal prep report saving 3-5 hours per week on cooking and cleaning, plus an average of \$200-300 monthly on their food budget.



Less Stress During the Week

Dinner decisions are already made, so you can focus on family time instead of scrambling in the kitchen every evening.



Less Takeout

With ready-to-eat meals in your fridge, you'll eliminate those expensive last-minute restaurant runs that drain your budget.



Fewer Wasted Groceries

Every ingredient has a purpose in your meal plan, meaning less food spoiling in the back of your fridge.



Saves 3-5+ Hours Weekly

Batch cooking and cleaning once means you reclaim valuable hours throughout the week for what matters most.

The 60-Minute Sunday System

The beauty of meal prep doesn't require you to spend your entire Sunday in the kitchen. With a streamlined system, you can prepare a week's worth of meals in just 60 minutes. The key is focusing on versatile basics that can be mixed and matched throughout the week rather than cooking seven completely different meals. Think of it as creating building blocks: proteins, carbs, and vegetables that you can combine in different ways to keep meals interesting without multiplying your work.

Start by choosing your five core meals for the week. These should include recipes you're comfortable making and that your family actually enjoys eating. There's no point in prepping elaborate dishes that will sit untouched in your fridge. Next, identify which components can be batch cooked together. For example, while your oven roasts chicken breasts and vegetables, you can have rice cooking on the stovetop and boil eggs for snacks. This overlapping approach is how you compress what would normally be hours of cooking into a single efficient session.

1

Pick 5 Meals

Choose recipes that share common ingredients and are family favorites. This keeps your grocery list short and ensures nothing goes to waste.

2

Batch Cook Basics

Cook proteins (chicken, ground turkey, beans), grains (rice, quinoa), and roasted vegetables all at once using oven and stovetop simultaneously.

3

Portion Snacks

Divide fruit, nuts, cheese, and other snacks into grab-and-go containers. This prevents overeating and makes healthy choices effortless.

4

Label & Store

Use masking tape and markers to label everything with contents and dates. Store meals in clear containers so you can see what's available at a glance.

The labeling step might seem unnecessary, but it's actually crucial for avoiding waste. When containers are clearly marked with what's inside and when it was prepared, you'll know exactly what needs to be eaten first. Plus, other family members can easily grab the right meal without opening every container. Invest in a good set of microwave-safe, stackable containers with tight-fitting lids—they'll make storage and reheating much simpler.

Simple Weekly Grocery List

Shopping with a detailed list is the foundation of successful meal prep. When you walk into the grocery store with a plan, you avoid impulse purchases that blow your budget and buy ingredients that never get used. This checklist covers the essentials for a week of balanced, family-friendly meals. Customize it based on your family's preferences and dietary needs, but use it as your starting template every week. The goal is to make shopping as quick and efficient as your meal prep routine.

Proteins

- Chicken breasts or thighs (3-4 lbs)
- Ground turkey or beef (2 lbs)
- Eggs (1 dozen)
- Canned beans (3 cans)
- Greek yogurt (32 oz)

Vegetables

- Bell peppers (3-4)
- Broccoli (2 crowns)
- Carrots (2 lbs bag)
- Spinach or mixed greens (1 container)
- Cherry tomatoes (1 pint)
- Sweet potatoes (3-4 medium)

Carbs & Grains

- Brown rice or quinoa (2 cups dry)
- Whole wheat pasta (1 lb)
- Oats (1 container)
- Whole grain bread (1 loaf)
- Tortillas (1 package)

Snacks

- Mixed nuts (1 lb)
- String cheese (12 pack)
- Fresh fruit (apples, bananas, berries)
- Hummus (1 container)
- Crackers (1 box)

Breakfast

- Milk or milk alternative (1 gallon)
- Nut butter (1 jar)
- Honey (1 bottle)
- Frozen fruit for smoothies (2 bags)

Pantry Staples

- Olive oil
- Salt and pepper
- Garlic (fresh or powder)
- Onions (2-3)
- Canned tomatoes (2 cans)
- Low-sodium broth (2 boxes)

Pro tip: Take a photo of this list on your phone so you always have it handy. Before shopping, quickly scan your fridge and pantry to check off what you already have. This prevents buying duplicates and helps you remember to use up items before they expire. Many parents find it helpful to shop the same day each week, turning it into a predictable routine that requires less mental energy.

5-Day Meal Plan

Having a concrete meal plan removes the daily decision fatigue of figuring out what to eat. This sample five-day plan uses the grocery list from the previous page and demonstrates how batch-cooked components can be mixed and matched throughout the week. Each breakfast takes less than 5 minutes to prepare, lunches can be packed the night before, and dinners simply need reheating. Feel free to swap meals around based on your schedule—if Wednesday is your busiest day, save the quickest dinner for then.

Day	Breakfast	Lunch	Dinner
Monday	Overnight oats with berries and nut butter	Chicken and quinoa bowl with roasted vegetables	Turkey taco bowls with rice, beans, and toppings
Tuesday	Greek yogurt parfait with granola and fresh fruit	Turkey taco salad with mixed greens	Baked chicken with sweet potato and broccoli
Wednesday	Scrambled eggs with whole wheat toast	Leftover chicken and sweet potato	Pasta with ground turkey marinara and side salad
Thursday	Smoothie with frozen fruit, spinach, and protein	Quinoa bowl with beans and roasted peppers	Chicken quesadillas with side of black beans
Friday	Overnight oats with honey and sliced banana	Leftover pasta and salad	Rice bowl with remaining chicken and vegetables

Notice how the same core ingredients appear in different combinations throughout the week. This variety prevents meal fatigue while maximizing your prep efficiency. The chicken you roast on Sunday appears in a quinoa bowl, with roasted vegetables, and in quesadillas. The ground turkey becomes both taco filling and pasta sauce. This is the secret to sustainable meal prep—you're not eating identical meals seven days in a row, but you're also not cooking from scratch every single night.

Snacks should also be part of your plan. Having pre-portioned snacks prevents the 3 PM vending machine run or the post-school snack frenzy that ruins dinner appetites. String cheese, apple slices with nut butter, veggie sticks with hummus, and mixed nuts are all grab-and-go options that keep energy levels steady between meals.

Where Parents Save Time

The true value of meal prep becomes clear when you add up all the time savings throughout your week. It's not just about the cooking itself—it's the reduction in trips to the grocery store, the elimination of post-dinner cleanup sessions, and the mental energy saved from not making food decisions multiple times per day. When you batch cook on Sunday, you're essentially doing all your cooking and major cleaning in one concentrated session instead of spreading it across seven separate occasions.

2+

Hours Saved on Cooking

Batch cooking proteins, grains, and vegetables once means you only reheat during the week, cutting nightly cooking time from 45 minutes to 10 minutes or less.

1+

Hour Saved on Cleaning

Cleaning up once on Sunday instead of after each weeknight meal means fewer dishes, less scrubbing, and more evening time with your family.

1+

Hour Saved on Grocery Trips

Shopping with a complete list once per week eliminates multiple rushed trips for forgotten ingredients and last-minute dinner supplies.

Beyond the quantifiable time savings, there's also the psychological benefit of reduced stress. When dinner is already planned and partially prepared, you eliminate the 5 PM panic that leads to expensive takeout orders or unhealthy convenience food. You can focus on helping with homework, playing with your kids, or simply relaxing after a long day. Many parents report that meal prep has improved their overall quality of life more than they expected because it removes a significant source of daily decision fatigue and stress.

The cleaning time savings are particularly significant. Instead of cooking in a messy kitchen seven times per week and dealing with dishes after every meal, you focus your cleaning effort into one substantial session. Yes, you'll have more dishes on Sunday, but you'll have dramatically fewer throughout the week. Plus, reheating meals generates minimal mess compared to cooking from scratch, so your weeknight cleanup becomes truly minimal.

BONUS: Turn Prep Time Into Extra Cash

Here's an unexpected benefit of developing meal prep skills: you can turn them into a side income stream. Once you've mastered efficient meal planning and preparation for your own family, you have marketable skills that other busy people will pay for. Whether you're looking to earn an extra \$50 per month for your coffee budget or \$200+ to cover groceries, there are several approachable ways to monetize your meal prep expertise without requiring any special certifications or major time commitments.

1

Grocery Delivery Apps

Sign up for Instacart, Shipt, or similar platforms to shop for others while doing your own grocery run. Many parents find they can add 2-3 orders to their weekly shopping trip and earn \$50-100 with minimal extra time investment. You're already going to the store—why not get paid for it?

2

Sell Baked Snacks

If you're already prepping snacks for your family, consider baking extra batches to sell. Healthy muffins, granola bars, and energy bites are popular with other busy parents. Check your local cottage food laws, then sell through Facebook groups, at kids' sports events, or to coworkers. Start small with \$25-50 worth of ingredients and see what sells.

3

Local Meal Prep Help

Offer meal prep services to neighbors, elderly community members, or new parents who need support. You could prep 3-4 days of meals for one or two clients each week using their kitchens and groceries. Charge \$75-150 per session depending on your area. This works especially well if you have existing connections through church, school, or neighborhood groups.

The beauty of these side income options is that they leverage skills you're already developing for your family. You don't need to invest in special equipment, get licensed (for most options), or commit to fixed hours. Start with whichever option feels most comfortable and manageable alongside your current routine. Even earning an extra \$50-75 monthly covers a significant portion of your grocery budget, essentially making your meal prep efforts pay for themselves.

Weekly Prep Checklist

Consistency is the secret to making meal prep a sustainable habit rather than a temporary experiment. This checklist gives you a simple framework to follow every week. Print it out and stick it on your fridge, or save it as a recurring reminder on your phone. The more you repeat this cycle, the faster and more automatic it becomes. What takes 90 minutes your first week might only take 45 minutes after a month of practice.

1 Plan Your Meals

Sit down with your calendar and choose 5 meals for the week. Consider your schedule—busier days get simpler meals. Write down your plan where everyone can see it.

2 Shop Once

Make your complete grocery list from your meal plan, check your pantry for what you already have, then do one thorough shopping trip. Stick to your list to avoid budget-busting impulse purchases.

3 Prep Your Meals

Dedicate 60-90 minutes to batch cooking proteins, grains, and vegetables. Work efficiently by using oven and stovetop simultaneously. Don't aim for perfection—aim for progress.

4 Portion Your Snacks

Divide snacks into individual grab-and-go portions. Cut up vegetables, portion out nuts and crackers, and prep any breakfast items that can be made ahead like overnight oats.

5 Clean Your Fridge

Before storing new meals, quickly wipe down shelves and toss any expired items. This ensures you have space and helps you see what needs to be eaten first.

6 Track Your Savings

Keep a simple log of money saved by not ordering takeout or throwing away food. Watching your savings grow provides motivation to stick with the habit.

Don't be discouraged if your first few weeks feel chaotic or take longer than expected. Like any new skill, meal prep requires practice. You'll discover shortcuts, figure out which recipes work best for your family, and develop your own personal rhythm. The important thing is to keep showing up each week. Even if you only prep three meals instead of five, that's still three dinners you won't have to think about during the week.

Consider involving your family in the process. Kids can help wash vegetables, stir pots, or pack snacks. Partners can tackle cleanup while you focus on cooking. Making it a team effort not only divides the work but also teaches children valuable life skills and creates opportunities for quality time together.

Keep It Simple, Keep It Consistent

As you embark on your meal prep journey, remember that perfection is not the goal—consistency is. You don't need Instagram-worthy containers or elaborate recipes. You need a system that works for your real life, with your real schedule, and your real family's preferences. Start with just two or three meals if five feels overwhelming. Use frozen vegetables if fresh ones feel like too much work. Buy pre-cut produce if it means you'll actually do the prep. The best meal prep system is the one you'll actually stick with.

The habits you're building now will serve you for years to come. Families who commit to meal prep report not just financial savings but improved nutrition, less food waste, and more quality time together. Children in meal-prepping households often develop healthier eating habits because nutritious food is always readily available. And the time savings compound over weeks and months—imagine having an extra 12-20 hours every month to spend however you choose.

Remember that some weeks will be easier than others. Life happens—someone gets sick, work gets crazy, or you simply don't have the energy. That's completely normal. Give yourself grace on the hard weeks, and celebrate your wins on the good weeks. The goal isn't to be perfect; it's to gradually shift toward a more organized, less stressful approach to feeding your family.

Your Sunday meal prep routine is more than just cooking—it's an investment in your family's health, your financial wellbeing, and your peace of mind. Every week you prep is a week where you choose planning over panic, homemade over takeout, and intention over chaos.



"The secret to meal prep success isn't having more time—it's using the time you have more intentionally."

Start this Sunday. Pick just three meals to prep. Make your grocery list. Set aside one hour. And take that first step toward easier, healthier, more affordable weeknight dinners. Your future self will thank you.

❏ **From CraftyDollar:** We believe that small, practical changes create big results. Meal prep is one of the most powerful habits busy families can develop. Here's to less stress, more savings, and dinners that actually make it to the table. You've got this! 🌿

Your Meal Prep Resources

Ready to put your meal prep plan into action? Below you'll find helpful resources and reminders to keep you on track. Bookmark this page, print out the checklist, or set Sunday reminders on your phone. The key is making this sustainable and simple—not adding more stress to your already busy life.



Container Essentials

Invest in good quality, microwave-safe containers with tight-fitting lids. Glass containers last longer and don't stain. You'll need at least 10-15 containers in various sizes.



Label Everything

Use masking tape and permanent markers to label contents and prep dates. This simple habit prevents waste and helps everyone grab the right meal quickly.



Plan Ahead

Look at your week every Sunday morning before you shop. Busy nights get simpler meals. Build in one flexible night for leftovers or eating out.

Quick Reference: Time & Money Saved



■ Avoided Takeout ■ Reduced Food Waste ■ Impulse Grocery Buys ■ Coffee Shop Stops

The average family saves \$125-150 per week through consistent meal prep habits. That's over \$6,000 annually—enough for a family vacation, emergency fund contribution, or paying down debt. Plus the 3-5 hours saved weekly gives you back nearly an entire workday every month.

1

Start Small

Begin with 2-3 meals this week. Master the basics before expanding to full week prep.

2

Stay Flexible

Life happens. Some weeks will be perfect, others chaotic. Progress over perfection always wins.

3

Celebrate Wins

Every prepped meal is a victory. Track your savings and time gained to stay motivated.

Ready to transform your weeknights? This Sunday is your starting point. Set aside just one hour, follow your checklist, and take control of your weekly meals. Your journey to less stress and more savings begins now.

– With warmth and encouragement, the CraftyDollar team 💚