

Five Planning Factors for Meals

According to food industry experts at the Hartman Group in Bellevue, Washington, only 24 percent of dinners are made from scratch, even though televised cooking shows have grown in popularity. Taking the time to meal plan means less impulse shopping, which often results in grabbing unhealthy options that won't benefit anyone in the family. You'll be more likely to make meals from scratch that use healthy ingredients because you won't have to spend time thinking about what to cook at the last minute. There are five factors you'll want to take into consideration when making your meal plan.

Available Time to Cook

Take a look at your week and determine how much time you have to cook. If there are a few busy days, you may want to grab a bagged salad that you can just open and serve; however, if your week is pretty uneventful, you'll be able to purchase separate salad ingredients and make your own. On days when you have a busy afternoon, plan a meal for the slow cooker that you can prepare in the morning and leave to cook during the day. Having a meal ready to go when you get home can make for a pleasant evening.

Seasonal Food Availability

Not only are seasonal foods more flavorful, but they also cost less. If you aren't sure which fruits and veggies are in season in your area, ask your grocer for a schedule. When blueberries are in season, consider adding blueberry muffins to your menu for breakfast and blueberry pies for dessert. If avocados are in season, plan to make fresh guacamole for a taco or quesadilla topping. Pumpkin season is a great time for making pumpkin soup or pumpkin bread.

Variety of Foods

The United States Department of Agriculture created MyPlate to encourage individuals and families to eat a variety of foods. The five all-important food groups necessary for optimal nutrition include vegetables, fruits, proteins, grains and dairy. Use these categories to plan well-rounded meals. It's important to note that fats and oils are no longer a part of the food pyramid and should always be used sparingly.

Special Occasions

Go over your calendar and take note of any special occasions coming up that week. These will alter your normal meal plans. For example, if you have a church potluck dinner, you'll need to plan a dish that's easy to transport. Organizing an outdoor picnic means planning finger foods and sandwiches, while a barbecue would lend itself to burgers, corn on the cob and fruit salad. Additionally, if you're planning a

birthday party for one of your children, you'll need to consider buying vegetable and cheese trays for the guests.

Financial Resources

The last factor to consider when planning your weekly meals is how much money you have to spend. Quicken lists 15 percent of a person's income as the typical amount budgeted for food. This figure includes purchasing groceries and eating out. That means if your family makes \$60,000 per year, you'll have about \$173.08 per week to shop with. To get the most out of your money, plan meals around the sale items listed in your local grocery store's weekly flyer, or around any food items that you have coupons for.