



WSU Extension - Mason County "Making a Difference" Simple Planning Goes a Long Way to Making Food Resources Last Longer

While we are safely staying put at home, many of us are experiencing the challenge of needing to work with less food to feed our families, whether it's because of limited shopping trips, lack of stocked store shelves or diminished access to food assistance services, or a new necessity due to Covid-19 financial burdens thrust upon our household budgets. That's why now is an especially important time to brush up on meal planning skills. By employing some simple strategies, not only will we stretch our food resources on hand to last much, much longer, but we'll also feed our families tasty nutritious meals while clearing out the back corners of our pantries and freezers, and gaining a new perspective on the versatility of what were once overlooked staples.

First, take stock of what you have. I start by making a separate list of all food items for the refrigerator, freezer, and pantry cupboard. I like to sort the items by the My Plate food groups: Dairy, Grains, Protein, Fruits, and Vegetables. I'll even note the amounts, as this is very useful later when I get to planning meals or consider recipes. Next, I highlight the perishable items that need to be used soon before they spoil. Nothing is worse than throwing out money with wasted food. Then I tape the food inventories on the side of my refrigerator, where I can easily see all that I have to work with. And very important - I cross off any items I use, and add it to my shopping list if it's an essential item that my family eats frequently (such as milk or eggs.)

Now you're ready to start planning daily meals and snacks. I've been in this habit for years and am old school - quickly jotting our week's meal plan on the back of an envelope and posting it on the fridge. However, there are a lot of free on-line menu planning tools and smart phone apps that also create shopping lists, give nutrition information, and will even store your favorite recipes. Some great meal planning tools can be found under nutrition education materials at snaped.fns.usda.gov.

Use your perishables first. As I sketch out my first week's worth of meals, I'm mindful to use my highlighted perishable foods first. In the gaps, I like to plan a soup, stew or casserole that I can

tuck leftover veggies in, or even simply toss them with cooked whole-grain pasta, brown rice, potatoes, lentils or beans - all nutritious, filling, and inexpensive meal builders that provide an assortment of protein, fiber, and minerals. Then I check over my daily menus to make sure I included lowfat or non-fat dairy and fruit. Should you have extra milk, hard cheese, or yogurt, these can be frozen for later use. Similarly, ripe fruit can be frozen, making an excellent future addition to smoothies, stirred into yogurt or oatmeal, or baked in muffins or crisps.

Mix and match your frozen and dry goods. As I plan subsequent weeks of menus, I look for ways to use frozen foods coupled with dry staples to create new meals, stretching what I already have on hand. For example, frozen spinach, kale, and a few links of sausage (or garbanzo beans) paired with canned tomato sauce, leftover cheese, and dry macaroni can come together as skillet lasagna. Frozen ends of bread can be transformed into garlic bread, and frozen bananas whipped into banana “ice cream.” See how creative you can get using up portions of barley, quinoa, and other pastas and grains with assorted veggies and eggs or legumes - a much cheaper source of protein than meat.

Cook once, eat twice. I often cook double batches of favorite go-to’s and freeze mini meals to eat later. The same goes for preparing larger batches of rice, pasta, beans, and meat and freezing smaller portions that can readily be used in the next weeks’ recipes. This not only saves time, energy, and cleaning, but really helps ensure I’m making the most of my limited food resources and stretching my grocery dollars.

For more eating healthy on a thrifty budget, as well as food planning during the coronavirus pandemic, go to [choosemyplate.gov](https://www.choosemyplate.gov).

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