

Cooking tips for busy people

Australians spend about one-third of their weekly household food budget on convenience foods, such as takeaway and supermarket ready-to-eat meals, and foods prepared outside the home.

There are many reasons why people are cooking less often. People's lives are busier; the two-income household can mean that neither partner has the time or energy to cook every night. There are also more people living alone, who often don't want to cook for themselves.

However, convenience foods are expensive and some are notoriously high in fat and salt. If you lack the time or motivation to cook, the following suggestions may be helpful.

Your pantry

You may be tempted to order takeaway if your pantry is bare and you can't face the thought of going to the supermarket. The secret is to stock long-life ingredients that can be combined in any number of ways to create interesting dishes. Suggestions include:

- Buy extra of long lasting vegetables like potatoes, carrots and onions, which can form the basis of soups or casseroles.
- Stock plenty of dried pasta, such as spaghetti, fettuccine, macaroni and spiral varieties.
- Keep a selection of other long-life carbohydrates like rice (stock different varieties such as white, brown, arborio and jasmine), Asian-type dry noodles, lentils and couscous.
- Use tinned tomatoes, tomato paste, tinned corn and other vegetables (look for 'no added salt' varieties) for pasta sauces, soups or casseroles.
- Stock a range of canned meats including tuna, salmon, ham, crab meat, sardines, beef and chicken.
- Keep tins of legumes on hand (for example kidney beans, three bean mix, chick peas).
- Include canned and packet soups.
- Have a stock of oils and vinegars including olive oil, sesame oil, balsamic vinegar and red wine vinegar. You can make a wide range of salad dressings or marinades with these ingredients if you include a dash of herbs and lemon juice.
- Stock dried herbs including basil, coriander, mint, thyme, oregano and mixed herbs.
- Useful condiments include tomato sauce, mustard, mayonnaise, relish, stock cubes, ready-made stock, soy sauce and chilli sauce.
- Dried goods to stock include pine nuts, curry powder, sun-dried tomatoes and shiitake mushrooms.
- Store a variety of nuts - these are a great meat alternative, especially in pasta or rice dishes.

Your freezer and fridge

Keep your fridge and freezer stocked with handy healthy food. For example:

- Buy frozen vegetables. Contrary to popular belief, these products retain a high proportion of their nutrients.
- Fresh crushed garlic and ginger are available in jars to keep in the fridge and fresh herbs are available in tubes to keep in the freezer.
- Citrus fruits like oranges have a long life when refrigerated.
- Fresh lemon and lime juice can be bought in bottles and stored in the fridge.
- Grated cheese can be sealed and stored in the freezer to increase its shelf life.
- When buying fresh meat, choose de-boned varieties. Divide the quantities into meal-sized portions and freeze separately.
- Buy red meat and chicken already sliced or diced or marinated.
- Buy bread in bulk and keep it in the freezer until needed. Bake-at-home rolls can also be kept in the freezer to have as an accompaniment to many different meals.

Meal suggestions

The above pantry and fridge items can offer you a range of easily prepared main meals including:

- Pasta
- Casseroles
- Stews
- Curries
- Soups
- Risottos
- Stir fries
- Salads.

Time saving suggestions

Suggestions include:

- **Make extra portions** - while you're making your pasta sauce, casserole or soup, make double (or even quadruple) the quantity you need. Freeze the remainder in meal portions, and you have ready-made meals for later in the week or month.
- **Double up on tasks** - you can save time if you do two things at once. For example, prepare your pasta sauce while your spaghetti is cooking.
- **Prepare easy meals** - one-pot meals (such as soups, risottos, stews, curries and casseroles) save on washing up.
- **Use a microwave** - it's easier and faster to microwave foods than cook them in the oven or on the stovetop. Check your manufacturer's instructions on how to best cook different foods using your microwave.
- **Use small, thin chunks of food** - they cook faster than big chunks.
- **Don't throw out leftovers** - store them appropriately (such as refrigerated or frozen) for a quick meal the next day. Or reinvent the leftovers in a creative way; for example, pasta sauce can make a tasty jaffle filling or the base for a pie filling.
- **Cook the night before** - for example, cook in the evening (when any children have gone to bed) and ask your partner, if you have one, to help you with the preparation like chopping vegetables. This will speed up the process and make it more fun. This means time-consuming recipes like soups, curries, stews or casseroles can cook while you relax in the evening.

Get motivated

Some people who live alone don't like to cook for themselves. Different ways to motivate yourself include:

- Invite people over for dinner more often.
- Offer to go round to a friend's house to cook for them one night (hopefully they will then return the favour one night for you!)
- If you have a child in your life (such as a grandchild, niece or nephew), involve them in cooking sessions. Most children enjoy preparing and cooking food and you can have a lot of fun together making pasta sauce or soup in bulk.
- If your problem is coming up with interesting meals, a good cookbook can inspire you or browse the Better Health Channel for easy, quick-to-prepare recipe ideas. Some food packets also have easy recipes on them.
- Think of the money you'll be saving by cooking, instead of eating convenience foods (and how much better it is for you). Use the saved money to buy yourself a treat.

Where to get help

- Dietitian
- Healthy recipes on the Better Health Channel.

Things to remember

- Keep a stock of long-life ingredients (such as frozen, canned or dried products) that can be combined in any number of ways to create interesting dishes.
- If you live alone and don't like to cook for just one, try inviting people over for dinner more often.
- Cook in bulk, and freeze meal-size portions for later in the week or month.

Want to know more?

For references, related links and support group information, go to More information.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

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