

A GUIDE TO

# MEAL PLANNING AND PREP

For Women Who Don't Need One More Thing On Their Plate



## **WHAT THE HECK DOES MEAL-PLANNING EVEN MEAN**

Meal planning consists of four key elements:

- 1. Planning your meals for the week.**
- 2. Making a list of the ingredients.**
- 3. Purchasing the ingredients.**
- 4. Preparing the ingredients in a way that makes meal time more convenient for you.**

## **BUT WHY?!**

I know what you're thinking. *Ain't nobody got time for this*. You're running kids all around town. You're trying to answer emails on your phone before you run inside the hockey rink. You're behind on scheduling that dentist appointment and hoping your tooth doesn't fall out of your head in the meantime. Cooking isn't even your thing so why the heck would you take that on? One more thing? Are you kidding?

I completely get it. Truly! I started making meal-planning a priority when my oldest kids were toddlers. They were thirteen months apart and it was nuts. I hardly had time to go to the bathroom alone, let alone learn to cook, which I also didn't really know how to do beyond spaghetti. Everything was about moment-to-moment survival and I couldn't fathom thinking much beyond the next meal, let alone a week or more into the future. One day though, it occurred to me that the current chaos I was calling a system wasn't working for me. I realized that the amount of time I was spending every day at 4 PM frantically racking my brain and the internet for "meals to make with a can of tomato sauce and a pineapple" could be better spent. I had to admit that it was tough to offer myself and my family a nutritious variety of foods when all I could seem to find in my my cupboards at snack time were those giant chocolate muffins and an old bag of lentils that I was going to, note to self, use someday. This, my friend, was how meal-planning was first hesitantly attempted and I've never gone back.

Making the decision to meal plan and building it into one of our family's habits was one of the best decisions I have ever made, not only for my family but for myself too. I have eliminated the dinner-time panic. I now always have healthy options on hand and have been able to expose my kids to a wide-variety of food. I save so much time! The hour it takes me to meal plan and make my grocery list is much less than the time I used to spend thinking about this, stressing about this, throwing open cupboards wildly, and racing to the store to pick up one more thing. In learning to meal plan and figuring out what sort of meal prep works for me, I have eliminated a huge source of stress in my life.



# MEAL PLANNING AND PREP

## GIVES YOU:

Freedom from wondering and worrying about meal time and food

Readily available, convenient healthy options

More consistency and awareness of your nutrition

The opportunity to save time and money

Wouldn't it be nice to not start thinking about dinner after breakfast, vaguely wondering why people even need to eat at all, building up to that stressful moment when you're hoping the mystery meat you're defrosting will be done in time to eat before the kid's soccer practice? Freedom is here! Stay with me. Listen to the sound of my voice and come towards the refrigerator light.

## **GOOD NEWS: YOU CAN'T MESS THIS UP!**

There are many different ways to meal-plan and meal-prep. There is no right or wrong way; The best way is what works for you and your family. I am going to tell you what works for me and my family and give you some options I know work well for others. You get to decide what works best for you! **It will often take some trial and error.**

## **STEP ONE: TAKE A REALISTIC LOOK AT YOUR WEEK**

**The first thing you will want to do is to write down the days that fall under the time period you are planning for, starting with the day that you are planning to get your groceries.** You will want to write this in a vertical list, with room to write beside each day. I personally meal plan for a week because that is what I find to be the most manageable and gives my family the biggest benefits. Some other women I know like to plan for two weeks and some for a month. I find a week to be a great starting point and what I would advise you plan for if you're just starting out.

### **WHY I PREFER TO PLAN FOR A WEEK:**

- **LESS SURPRISES.** I can see exactly what I'm dealing with. I am more likely to know if I have family dropping by for dinner, events that come up which mean we aren't home, etc.
- **EASIER TO STAY ON BUDGET.** I find I save money going week to week because I set my limit and then operate from a place of, "ok, what can we live without for a week? We really don't need to buy five jars of applesauce; one will do."
- **FRIDGE AND FREEZER SPACE.** This is something to consider. Where are you going to store all this food?
- **SAVE MONEY THROUGH LESS FOOD WASTE.** Everything you are buying is more likely to be consumed rather than forgotten.
- **SAVE MONEY THROUGH LESS FOOD MIX-UPS.** It's unlikely you will discover that the produce you need for your meal has gone bad or that you've forgotten something, leaving you with no choice except to take "just a litttttle trip" to the store. \$80 later....You get the idea.



After you've done that...

## **STEP TWO: SEE WHAT'S ON SALE (OPTIONAL)**

This is where I tell you that I personally do the pick-up grocery service and love it for many reasons which I don't hesitate to rant and rave about further on in this guide. One of the many reasons is that **you can quickly see what's what for deals online**. Whatever way you choose to check the sales you, you're going to want to do that now. Now, I personally only take it so far as looking at the meat because meat tends to be the most expensive and the thing we plan around. However, you could take this a step further and look at all the things. Once I have a good idea or jot down what my options are, I move on to the next step.

## **STEP THREE: PLAN YOUR MEALS**

**Your next job is to plan your meals for the week based on the sale or desired items you are going to buy.** As I mentioned, I like to plan around the meat I'm buying because that is usually chosen based on cost. I like to buy in bulk and try to use big pack of meat twice or three times. If you repeat the protein source, it eliminates a lot of overwhelming options when it comes to planning your meals. For example, if you know you're buying ground beef that week and you know that a bulk pack can make two meals for your family, you know you need to pick two of your favourite ground beef meals and plug them in. Done. If you want to have a different meat every night of the week, you are more than welcome to do so but this is just what works for me. You could base it off meatless meals, produce, etc. Whatever you value, plan around that.

### **THINGS TO CONSIDER WHEN PLANNING YOUR MEALS**

Plan meals that will give you a balanced plate of protein, vegetables, carbs, and fats

Aim to include a variety of foods

Be realistic about prep and cooking time

Remember the notes you made earlier about prior commitments on each day



I mainly meal plan for my dinners and not my other meals. I did find writing down breakfast and lunch ideas very helpful in the beginning but once we established some routine breakfast and lunch foods, it became unnecessary

to write them down. They have become our staples and the things we buy every week.

**I almost always plan in a “break” from cooking.** It is often something that is easy and fast to make such as omelettes for dinner. Sometimes it’s a day when we will be ordering Vietnamese food.

**If you are new to cooking, this is going to be so great!** I know right now it seems intimidating but you can do this. Start by following along with recipes that get rave reviews online. Once you become comfortable with the same flavours, say Mexican or Asian food, it’s much easier to be adaptable and not worry about recipes at all. You will even be able to recognize places you could make healthy swaps! For now though, the goal is to get you planning, cooking, and taking out the overwhelm. You may even want to try a new cookbook! Start simple and maybe with something like “30 Minute Meals” in the title. **The goal here isn’t to go gourmet and have our recipes have complicated steps and weird ingredients. The goal here is to give ourselves our sanity back.** Remember, we want this to become sustainable! Making Cordon Bleu on a bed of Quinoa with Garlic Aioli drizzle every night is probably not going to be a habit that sticks around. However, if you’ve got the time and you love to cook, do whatever inspires you and floats your boat.

**Remember, this gets easier the more you practice. Starting to meal-plan can feel like a lot of work at first but, the more you do it, the easier it becomes and the more time you’re saving yourself a lot of time in the long-run.**

## **HELPFUL HINTS:**

- **Don’t stress about every ingredient or meal being perfectly healthy.** Instead, aim for balance and variety. Food obsession and over-thinking generally don’t serve us! Food is just food. We can make great strides in our nutrition through meal-planning alone.
- The internet is your friend and your enemy. **Don’t be afraid to try new recipes but set yourself up for success by being realistic about your time and your cooking experience.** If you plan everything from the Food Network website on your first week, the chances of you sticking to

that long-term are not great. If you want to plan one of those fancy meals for a quiet Friday evening though, go wild! I just really encourage you to keep it simple in the beginning and to build a repertoire of healthy recipes you will keep coming back to. I like to search with the word “easy” in front of everything. “Easy pad thai.” “Easy pot roast.”

- **Don't be afraid to try something new! Experiment with ways to add nutrients in to your meals.**

This next part is key. **You are going to want to save your meal plan so that you can refer back to it later.** Saving your meal plan allows you to reap the rewards of the work you're doing now at a later date when you just CANNOT deal with coming up with new meals that week. It gives you ideas when you're in a rut and reminds you of old favourites.

## **SAVING YOUR MEALS AND MEAL PLAN:**

You will want to note the meal and where to find the recipe.

- **In your phone notes.** This my personal preference.
- **In a computer doc or journal.**
- **On Pinterest.** Pinterest can be intimidating and there can be some crazy stuff on there (no, I do not have any interest in making my kid's food look like a majestic vegetable landscape.) However! **Having a Pinterest board where you can keep a visual of all your meals and refer back when you're in a rut is so helpful.** You can even create a board for meals you see that you'd like to try, which is very helpful when you're stuck on ideas. You also are able to save recipes quickly this way.
- **Some people find it helpful to have a monthly rotation.** They keep their meal plans for four weeks and then they restart back at week one.

**When I have selected my meals, I keep the internet tabs open or bookmark the cookbooks.** Then I'm all set for my next step.

## **STEP FOUR: PLUG IN OR LIST YOUR INGREDIENTS**

Here is where you get to read my love letter to grocery pick-up services. I. Love. Grocery. Service. Pick-ups. So. Much. Why? Why do you ask? Isn't that weird? Do they even pick the nice produce or do they just give you the scraggly rejects?

Ah, young padawan. Let me tell you that OF COURSE they pick the nice produce because they don't want you to complain and come back. You can specify (at least at my store of choice) what kinds of things you are ok for them to swap (say, you don't care what brand of canned beans you get but you're picky about the brand of bread,) how green you want your bananas, and probably anything your heart desires. I try to reign it in so they don't hate me too much.



## WHY I LOVE GROCERY-STORE PICK-UP

- **I cannot overemphasize how nice it is to not get out of your car**, especially as a mom. You call. They come out into that nutty parking lot. They stick the groceries in your car (I help so I don't feel like a total princess) and then they say, have a lovely day ma'am (and I think ma'am?! Am I there already?!) but I say thanks and remind myself not to hug the delivery person. I don't have to get all four kids out of the car in the deep-freeze. I don't have to push the grocery cart through the snow in pregnancy. Even if it sometimes means I sit in my car and wait and read or answer emails or listen to a podcast (oh, the hardships in life) however long I do that is better than taking kids into the grocery store where I try to smile and bat my eyes while I say, "hands in the cart, please. We don't eat the produce through the plastic bag, please." Anything is better than that, ok?!
- **You save money** by being able to check deals online, adjust your cart virtually, and not being surprised by how quickly it all added up. You don't have to try to sneakily bump things off the conveyor belt with your elbow.
- **No impulse shopping** which saves money and helps you make choices that support your goals. There is no accidentally finding yourself in the candy or chip or bakery aisle. You buy what you need and never even get a good look at anything else.

But I digress....

**If you do grocery store-pick up, this is when you plug the ingredients in online. If you shop in store, you would make your archaic, erm, traditional list now.**

**Go recipe by recipe, closing tabs and books as you go so you don't miss anything.** This takes very little time.

When I have finished all my dinner meals, I move on to adding our breakfast and lunch staples to the list. Then to snacks (more on this in the meal-prep section) and whatever else I have written down in my running phone note that we're out of.

When I am all done that, I make sure the budget is adding up and add or take away until I get there. Then I click a few more buttons and voila.

Groceries will be ready for me to roll on up after grabbing the kids from school the next day. **I have set myself up for success for the week.**

## **STEP FIVE: PICK UP YOUR GROCERIES**

Go get 'em!

## **STEP SIX: MEAL PREP**

If you thought meal planning was the worst, I'm guessing you're not a fan of meal prep either. Don't worry, stay with me. Meal prep doesn't have to be what you are probably thinking!

**Meal prep is preparing your food to some degree ahead of time so that it's ready when you need it.**

There are two different approaches to this. (Hint: I take the one that allows me to be the laziest. Surprise!)

### **CHOOSE YOUR STYLE OF MEAL PREP**

Make use of the time you are already spending cooking and chopping ingredients

OR



Set aside time or a day to make whole meals to eat throughout the week or freeze

**I don't set aside time or a day for my meal prep. I just make good use of the time I'm already taking to chop or cook!** For example, if I'm already making broccoli as a side, I can make a whole ton of broccoli that will stay readily available to grab for lunches in my fridge. If I am going to make chicken drumsticks in the oven or thighs in the crock pot, I'm going to double the batch and usually just season it with salt and pepper. That gives me some options to use it differently (with different sides, sauces, and flavours) throughout the week so I don't get bored. If I'm chopping up green onions, peppers, or fruit, I might as well chop a bunch of it and stick it in some containers, ready to grab in a rush.

**This style of meal prep requires little to no more time than I'm already taking and creates no more dishes than I am already using.**

**Some people set aside time to create various meals to use throughout the week or to freeze for a busy day.** The weekends, particularly Sunday, are a popular day for this style of meal-planning because you are getting set for the week. Doubling a batch of something freezable to keep for a day that would usually have you calling up a pizza place is always a good idea. We have lived off previously made and frozen meals through many a pregnancy and postpartum time.

There are several degrees of meal prep:

**Dinner meals**

**Lunches**

**Little snack bags**

**Breakfast**

As a work-mostly-from-home-mom, I don't find that any meal prep besides dinner to be necessary for me but many people find it works for them, especially if you aren't generally eating lunch at home. Some people take it further still and make breakfasts ready-to-go in mason jars or pre-made smoothie packs. Many people enjoy having snack bags ready to grab for themselves and for their kids.

Do whatever works best for you and your family!

## **STEP SEVEN: HAVE QUICK OPTIONS ON HAND**

Something else I find helpful that requires little to no prep is to **always have healthy staple options on hand**. If all else fails and the entire house contracts some kind of unspeakable disease and the toddlers are trying to bring down the house from the inside out, at least I can assemble a variety of options that hit on each food group. What I mean by this is that I make sure I have raw veggies (usually involving mini in the name, cucumbers, peppers, etc) and fruits like mandarins and bananas. Easy to eat in a rush or stick in your diaper bag or gym bag. Protein powder and bars. Nuts. Cheesestings. Pepperoni sticks. Deli meat.

None of these foods are fancy and some of them aren't perfect or have been processed and all those things we are supposed to freak out about. **However, being flexible and letting go of the idea of perfect meals or perfect foods is going to do us many more favours in the big scheme of things**. What is going to happen if you don't have the perfect meal prepped and you try to just white-knuckle it until you make it home? You'll likely end up going the fast food route and getting something that is comparably less nutritious. You may be able to hold off until home, only to scarf down whatever you see first, without any thought to your body telling you it was actually full 15 minutes ago. **Having a quick snack options to keep you satisfied until you can sit down and eat a mindful balanced meal, is going to have a better long-term result than trying to hang in there until you're able to sit down and eat.**

## **STEP EIGHT: MAKE IT A HABIT. MAKE IT A SYSTEM.**

Meal-planning and meal-prepping can seem like a lot at first. I get that! If you stick with it every week, eventually it will just be a part of your life.

Ask yourself what meals you struggle with the most?

What meals do you find it tempting to just head to the drive-through for?

**Start there and work your way up, rather than attempting to meal-plan your entire life away.**

- **Helpful tip: While you are still forming your habit, it's great to have a reminder. Set a weekly event in your phone to pop up and remind you that it's time to make a plan (preferably before you run out of groceries and everyone riots!)**

Meal planning and prep will become your habit - your system for getting nutritious food options to yourself and your family. Next time your kid asks you at 10 AM what you're making for dinner, you'll know the answer...and can choose to withhold it because you still don't even want to think about dinner until at least 4 PM, ok?!

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### **To recap:**

- 1. Make a vertical list of all meal-plan days. Take a realistic look at your week and add notes.**
- 2. See what's on sale.**
- 3. Plan your meals around whatever your family values. Save your plan and recipes. Have quick options on hand.**
- 4. Plug the ingredients in to your list and add your weekly go-tos.**
- 5. Pick up your groceries**
- 6. Meal Prep in the style and level that works for your family**
- 8. Repeat weekly until you no longer have to think about it and then you have formed your new meal-planning habit.**

## OTHER HELPFUL TIPS

- We bought our kids little **Thermoses** this year and they have been life-changing! We heat up leftovers in the morning and it gives them so many more options. Make sure you have the right containers for the job.
- **I pick up a rotisserie chicken almost every grocery day.** That gives us a hot meal for the night with the quick addition of some rice or potatoes and chopped raw vegetables. The leftovers make great lunches and, if you're feeling adventurous, you can even use the bones to make a delish chicken stock!
- **Thinking outside the box is your friend.** You don't HAVE to take a sandwich for lunch! If you want to prep an extra "dinner" style meal and dole it out into containers, great! If you want to make a big batch of salad - green, quinoa, couscous, whatever - great! Do what works for you and eat what you enjoy.
- **Learning how to make sauces is super simple and something that gets easier with time.** You can cut out a lot of added sugar and preservatives by making things yourself. That said, there is nothing wrong with store-bought sauces in moderation. They make things go much faster and tastier in a pinch when the goal is learning to eat at home.
- **Spices are so helpful.** The more variety of spices, the more types of food you are able to cook. It might take a while to build up your stash but it's great when you have one!

## SAMPLE MEAL PLAN FOR OUR FAMILY:

MONDAY - rotisserie chicken (hot from the store upon grocery-pickup), rice, broccoli

TUESDAY (chicken thighs ) - butter chicken, rice, peas

WEDNESDAY (ground beef) (working, quick and easy) - chili

THURSDAY (meatless) - cauliflower leek and potato soup

FRIDAY (chicken thighs) - crockpot chicken tacos with corn tortillas, green salad

SATURDAY - vegetarian stir-fry with rice noodles

SUNDAY (ground beef) - hamburger soup



# Tara Abel

is a mom to four wild and sweet kids, wife to her high school sweetheart, a certified personal trainer, and a pre and postnatal specialist.

After becoming a mom, Tara struggled for a long time with negative body image, extremes, diets, postpartum challenges, and being overwhelmed by the state of her health in general. She overhauled her lifestyle and lost eighty pounds, fell in love with fitness and discovered things that completely changed her life. She now teaches women about creating healthy lifestyles from small, sustainable changes, moderation, and how to get rid of the all-or-nothing mindset. She is an advocate for informed fitness choices for pre and postnatal mamas as well as education surrounding core

and pelvic floor health. She loves talking mental health and postpartum depression, self-care, body positivity, and taking care of your health as a whole person - body, mind, and spirit. Most of all, she is passionate about empowering other women to discover how simple and powerful it can be to allow fitness to change their lives too.

When Tara's not lifting weights, you can find her spending time with her family, being overly competitive at board games, doing home renos, or at Ikea getting just one more thing.

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