

Menu Planning Strategies

I have an embarrassing confession to make: I don't cook dinner for my family every night. In fact, I'm happy if I manage to cook even one night a week. If I have leftovers for a second dinner, I'm thrilled.

We all have our own personal barriers that prevent us from regularly getting a good family meal on the table. My barriers are lack of time and disorganization. Other people's barriers could be a lack of confidence in the kitchen, a near-empty pantry, a family of picky eaters, a busy family schedule or even not being in the habit of eating together. However, the benefits of everyone sitting down to a meal together, especially a homemade meal, are enormous. Research shows that children who eat meals with their families perform better in school, eat a better diet, have better mental health and verbal development and are at lower risk for obesity, substance abuse and other risky behaviors. Adults who eat with other people tend to have better mental and physical health, stronger social connections and have a lower risk of high blood pressure and obesity. For all of these reasons and more, whatever your barriers are, I hope that you will join me in surmounting them and start making family dinners a priority.

My goal is to teach you how to take one day a week to plan and shop for five night's worth of dinners. I don't expect you to cook every night, so I'm assuming you'll eat out one or two nights a week and maybe have leftovers once. Even if your family is only comprised of two people, or if cooking three or four nights a week is more realistic for you, that's fine; it's still worth the effort to take some time to plan, shop and cook. The important thing is that you sit down



with your family at the end of the day to share a healthful meal.

✓ Your Dinner Menu

"What's for dinner?" is the eternally unanswered question in my household. It will be nice to only have to answer it once a week from now on. When I plan a menu, I like to have both a first and second course, as well as dessert. The first course is usually very simple, like a bowl of cut-up fruit, tomatoes with avocado or a bowl of low-sodium canned soup. For the second course, I try to make sure that I put together a plate with at least one-half vegetables, a quarter protein and a quarter whole grains or starchy vegetables. Try to vary your proteins so that you only eat red meat (beef, pork or lamb) once a week, fish at least twice a week, poultry (chicken,

turkey or duck) up to two to three times a week and vegetarian proteins at least twice a week. Include an array of colorful vegetables in different forms, e.g., raw, steamed, roasted, stir-fried and "souped." Starches can be brown rice, quinoa, wild rice, barley, whole-wheat pasta, baby potatoes, sweet potatoes, peas, corn or winter squash. Once in a while, a "one-pot" dinner is nice, too. One-pot dinners include vegetables, protein and starch all in one dish. Starchy vegetables count as both a vegetable and a starch. If you prefer to make only a single course, make sure to include at least three servings of different vegetables. I will go into more detail about the components of your main course later on. Dessert is always something small, but satisfying. I try to keep it under 100 calories. Our options



Gelson's registered dietitian, Jessica Siegel, has a Masters in Public Health. However, she is not a doctor and her nutritional recommendations are not tailored to specific health problems. Consult your physician before beginning any nutritional program. To contact Jessica, please call her at 1-800-GELSONS.

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include a miniature dark chocolate Dove ice cream bar, half of a Julie's organic ice cream sandwich, a piece of dark chocolate or a piece of fruit.

✓ Recipes Redux

Choosing recipes can be the hardest and most time-consuming part of this whole process. The keys to success here are (1) finding recipes that match your cooking abilities and time limits, (2) using recipes your family likes and (3) organizing those recipes so that they are easily accessible when it is time to plan your menus and cook.

It's important to have a reliable resource for healthful, easy and tasty recipes. I use my own recipes that are conveniently posted on the Gelson's website at www.gelson.com. Epicurious.com is another great way to find good recipes because they are reviewed by people who have tried them. Magazines, cookbooks, moms and friends are other good resources. When collecting recipes, try to amass a good variety of fish, poultry and vegetarian recipes and always be on the lookout for easy vegetable recipes (such as the recipes from my new "Naked Food of the Month" series).

You may know what your family likes to eat, but remember not to become a short-order cook, making different foods for different members of your family according to their varying tastes. Also, if you have young children, then try to practice Ellyn Satter's division of responsibility: it is up to you to offer a variety of healthful foods to your child, but it is up to them to decide if and how much they will eat. Always try to include at least two healthful foods that your child likes when planning your dinner menus.

There are many ways to organize your recipes. If you use a website like epicurious.com, you can create your own shopping list and save the recipes you like to a personal recipe book on the site. For recipes you pick up at Gelson's, print, or tear out of a magazine, try to use a notebook with clear plastic sleeves that will become an organized home for all of your recipes. If you also use cookbooks, you should keep a piece of paper in your recipe notebook with the name of the recipe, the cookbook it came from and the page it is on (you can use my "Favorite Recipes" form that accompanies this issue of Nutrition Notes). Alternatively, you can make a photocopy of the recipe from the



cookbook and store it in the notebook. Some super-organized people actually scan their favorite recipes into their computers so that they can access them all from one place. Whichever method you decide on, finding one centralized home for your recipes is a must.

Once you have been planning menus for several weeks, you can start to reuse the ones you like, so keep good records and you will be able to reuse the menus and shopping lists you have already created.

✓ Planning the Menus

The best way to start the menu planning process is to pick one day a week when you have time to sit down, look at recipes, plan menus and shop. Sunday is probably a good day, but planning on Saturday and shopping on Sunday could work, too.

On your designated menu planning day, begin by looking at your family members' schedules to see what events might get in the way of your cooking or having a family meal. Perhaps you will need to schedule take-out or leftovers for a very busy night, in which case you would only need to plan for four dinners instead of five. Alternatively, if you will have some extra time one morning, you may want to make a slow cooker meal in which you prep all of the ingredients and add them to the pot in the morning, with the meal being ready to eat several hours later.

To get started with planning your menu, first decide which protein you will have

each night and build from there (for instance, fish on Mondays, poultry on Tuesdays, vegetarian on Wednesdays and Fridays and red meat on Thursdays). Plan to use the most perishable foods earlier in the week (e.g., fish on Mondays, chicken on Tuesdays) so that they are at their best when you use them, since your meal is only as good as the quality of the ingredients you use. With that in mind, use processed foods strategically. I am not opposed to using ingredients from our salad bar or service deli, frozen vegetables, canned beans, pre-cut fresh vegetable blends or jarred pasta sauce, but I try to use healthful convenience foods and be picky when reading the ingredient lists (especially with sodium). By all means, please use these prepared foods if they will help you get a healthful, semi-homemade meal on the table for your family!

A successful meal really comes down to how much thought you put into the details. If you have one recipe that is complicated or time-consuming, then the other meal components should be relatively simple to prepare. You also want to be mindful of which flavors and types of foods go together—Chicken Parmesan and brown rice will not be a big hit, trust me! Even if you don't think you know that much about cooking and food, try to think about what foods are served together at restaurants; there is usually a variety of colors, flavors and textures on the plate. You can also choose a theme

for each night, like Mexican or Italian. Remember that you need to have at least three servings of different vegetables at dinner (you need 5–7 servings total for the day), and at least one serving of fruit at dinner, so plan accordingly. I have created a Weekly Dinner Menu Planner to help remind you of all of the important food group components as you plan your meals.

✓ Making the List

How you bring all of your recipes together and make your shopping list will depend on your recipe sources. I personally just print out my recipes and take them to the market with me. Once I know what I'm making, I go through my pantry and refrigerator and check off the items that I already have. At the market, I check off ingredients as I put them in my cart. A recipe website like epicurious.com comes in handy since it merges all of your recipes and makes a shopping list for you. You can also handwrite or type your shopping list, or you can cut and paste your various recipe ingredients into a new shopping list document on your computer. I've also made room for you to write your shopping list on my Weekly Dinner Menu Planner.

✓ Going to Gelson's

Realistically, you'll probably have to go to the market twice a week, especially if

you want to serve fish or chicken later in the week since those items only keep for one to two days in your refrigerator. Consider that some produce may not hold up so well after five days in your fridge, either. Additionally, your refrigerator might not be large enough to hold all of your dinner ingredients, plus food for breakfast, lunch and snacks. Even if you do have to shop twice a week, take just one day to plan a week's worth of dinners and then split the ingredients into two separate shopping lists. Try to group foods by department (e.g. produce, deli and dairy) so that you won't be criss-crossing the store for items you forgot because they were written down in random order. Once you are at the store, it's best to shop in the produce department last, since fruits and vegetables are delicate and can easily be bruised if placed at the bottom of your cart. Start with the heavier items, like regular deli and dairy, and then move on to the more delicate items. Always put your fish, poultry and meat into plastic bags before you put the packages into your cart to avoid cross-contamination with any other raw foods in your basket.

✓ Ready, Set, Cook!

Some of you may start preparing dinner once you get home from work, but if you have some spare time the night before or in the morning, consider preparing the ingredients ahead of time. I'm encouraging you to cook a lot of vegetables, and vegetable preparation takes time. Squeezing

in some measuring and chopping when you have a few extra minutes will shave time off your total cooking time in the end. Another time saver is to recruit older kids and adults in your household to help out in the kitchen (it is important to bring younger kids into the kitchen to help, but it will probably not save you any time).

Start out with the recipe that takes the longest to prepare and cook, then work on the next most time-intensive item, and so on. Take preparation and cooking time into account so that you can get everything on the table at the right time. Beyond that, just jump in and start cooking!

I hope I have inspired you to start planning and cooking meals for your family. I know that writing this article has made me feel more organized and prepared, so I hope it does the same for you. Plus, after looking through all of my recipes to make a sample weekly dinner menu for you, I'm excited to start making some of my old favorite recipes again. Now that you have the tools you need to feed your family as well as possible, I hope you are committed to dig in and start cooking with confidence.

Sample Dinner Menu Ideas

Day	1st Course	Protein	Vegetable 1	Vegetable 2	Starch	Dessert
Monday	Papaya halves with lemon wedges	Wild Salmon with Orange-Olive Tapenade*	Roasted cauliflower	Roasted asparagus	Lundberg Brown and Wild Rice Blend	1/2 Julie's Organic Ice Cream Sandwich
Tuesday	Wolfgang Puck Organic Classic Minestrone Soup	Tangy Peach Apricot Turkey Breast*	Steamed broccoli	Steamed carrots	(in the soup)	Summer Berry Delight*
Wednesday	Fresh fruit salad	Spanish Frittata*	Chopped Basil and Arugula Salad*	(in the salad)	(in the frittata)	1/2 ounce dark chocolate
Thursday	Harvest Lentil Soup	Cuban Flank Steak*	Spinach with Pine Nuts and Currants*	Baked orange-fleshed sweet potatoes	(in the sweet potatoes)	Chocolate Covered Fruit*
Friday	Steamed artichokes	Ravioli Soup*	(in the soup)	(in the artichokes)	(in the soup)	Grapes
Saturday	Go out to dinner					
Sunday	Family dinner at Mom's house					

*Recipes can be found at www.gelsons.com

Naked Food of the Month: Kale

Next up in my “Naked Food of the Month” series is kale. Although it is best known as a garnish that you may find on salad bars and buffets, this nutritional powerhouse of a leafy green is simply delicious and therefore requires very little preparation—in other words, it tastes great naked.

Carotenoids, indoles, vitamin C and K are some of the major nutrients that kale has to offer. Carotenoids, such as beta carotene, lutein and zeaxanthin, help protect against cancer and cataracts. Indoles, the phytonutrients that make broccoli and cabbage so healthy, are also found in this leafy green from the “headless” cabbage family and are believed to offer very potent cancer protection (especially against breast cancer). Vitamin C is an important antioxidant that plays a role in protecting against heart disease, certain cancers, cataracts, osteoporosis and, as you probably know, the common cold. Vitamin K has been shown to reduce fracture risk and bone loss, as well as aid in blood clotting.

Kale is very low in calories: one half cup of plain cooked kale has about 20 calories, 2 grams of fiber, 44% of the daily value for vitamin C and 96% of the daily value for vitamin A (from beta carotene). Kale is also a fair source of iron and calcium. Certain greens have a good amount of sodium, but



the sodium in kale is insignificant—about 15 milligrams per ½ cup cooked.

If you take a peek at the wet rack in the Gelson's produce department, you'll notice a dizzying array of big green leaves. We usually have two types of kale at Gelson's: Lacinato kale (also called Tuscan kale, black kale, dinosaur kale and cavolo nero) and curly kale. Both are delicious raw and cooked. Lacinato kale is more unusual and is one of my current vegetable obsessions since it is my baby's favorite food. Kale can be used interchangeably with spinach, Swiss chard, beet greens and some salad greens, since all of these greens are tender and on the sweet side.

Kale is in season right now through the fall. When shopping for these leafy greens, look for bright green leaves with no yellow or brown spots, holes, or major tears. Stay away from wilted leaves. When you bring kale home, wrap the unwashed leaves in a paper towel, put them back in their plastic

bags, and store them in the crisper. Use them within 2–5 days. Before cooking, swish individual leaves in a bowl of cool water and pinch off thick stems and any tough mid-ribs. Leaves should be damp for cooking. Most cookbooks recommend boiling kale, but that leaches the nutrients into the cooking water. To retain the nutrients, I recommend using the leaves in soups and stews or steaming or sautéing them in a little olive oil. This month, try my recipes for Chicken and Kale with Penne and Naked Kale Salad.

Jessica's Store Appearances Body Fat Testing

Jessica will be offering complimentary body fat testing and answering your questions about weight loss, food and nutrition. For more information, please visit www.gelsons.com.

Thursday, April 1

Silver Lake/Los Feliz 4:00pm

Tuesday, April 6

Calabasas 12:30pm

Saturday, April 10

Santa Barbara 12:00pm

Thursday, April 15

Encino 1:30pm

Friday, April 16

West Hollywood 12:00pm

Monday, April 19

Pacific Palisades 4:30pm

Testing method is Bioelectrical Impedance and is not appropriate for people with pacemakers or osteoporosis, pregnant women or children. Be well-hydrated for most accurate results.

Read My New Blog!

I want to help you raise healthy eaters, so I have started a blog called “Healthy Families” on our website, www.gelsons.com. I document my experiences and thoughts about feeding my ten-month old daughter and hopefully impart some worthwhile nutritional wisdom to my readers. Please check it weekly and join me on this very important parenting journey.