

Cooking for 1: Good for your health and budget

By Emily Bruyere

Learning how to cook is a key step toward eating healthier. If you are cooking just for yourself, there can be special challenges. Most recipes are designed to feed four to six. Most foods are packaged in larger quantities than are needed for one.

Your good health is worth the effort to prepare your own meals when you can. People who cook at home instead of eating out, tend to have better diets and lower food expenses, according to research reported by University of Washington Health Sciences. Researchers at Johns Hopkins found that people who cook most meals at home consume less fat, sugar and carbs than those who cook less or not at all.

Cooking for one should incorporate three steps to healthy eating: planning, purchasing, and preparing.

First, plan your meals and make a shopping list. Choose recipes that specifically serve one or two people. Or try cutting larger recipes in half. Remember to adjust the cooking time as well as the amount of ingredients.

- Keep frequently used ingredients on hand, including your favorite herbs, spices, sauces and condiments.

At the store, check out the frozen food aisles for easy, low-calorie vegetable side dishes, such as green beans and sliced carrots. Avoid products with added cream, butter or cheese sauces. You can steam frozen vegetables quickly in the microwave.

- Read labels and choose lower-calorie ingredients, such as reduced-fat cheese or low-fat soup.
- Purchase fresh foods, such as meat and produce, in small amounts so it can be consumed or frozen before it expires.
- Purchase foods with a long shelf-life, such as frozen meat, low sodium canned vegetables and dried fruits.
- Buy single servings of fresh foods like cheese, milk, yogurt and fruit. Though these items might initially be more expensive than bulk items, savings will be seen in the long run due to less wasted food.
- Regularly consumed shelf-stable foods like oatmeal, rice, pasta and beans that are purchased in bulk can be a cost-effective choice, easily divided into one or two servings.

When you get your groceries home, portion out your meat right away and refrigerate or freeze the individual portions. Your grocery butcher may be willing to package chicken breasts or other cuts of meat individually so you don't have to do it.

For easier meal preparation, transfer meat from the freezer to the refrigerator in the morning to defrost for supper that evening.

Make a batch of your favorite recipe and use it throughout the week. Store one-meal portions in freezer containers. You may keep what you will use within two or three days in the refrigerator or store foods for longer periods in the freezer. Consider freezing soups, stir fry and taco fillings.

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