



# It's Time to Plan... Your Menu

by Sarah Muntel, RD

MENU PLANNING IS AN IMPORTANT PART OF ANY WEIGHT MANAGEMENT PROGRAM AND IS ALSO NECESSARY FOR YOUR OVERALL HEALTH AND WELLBEING.

**W**e live fast-paced lives, trying to balance work, family and activities. Without planning ahead for meals, we often end up making poor choices, grabbing fast food, or skipping meals. Day after day, we fill our bodies with high calorie, high fat and processed junk food. This food lacks the nutrients we need for optimum health. It's time to make a change for your health. The way to do this is by planning nutritious healthy meals to give your body what it needs.

When you mention planning meals ahead, you get a lot of blank stares, shrugged shoulders and looks of confusion. The norm for many is to heat up a frozen pizza or run through fast food for a quick dinner. Planning meals can seem overwhelming at first, but there are so many positive ways your life can change for the better when you do.

## COST

First, let's think of the cost. A family of four can quickly spend \$25-\$30 at a fast food restaurant and more than \$50 for a sit-down restaurant. Now take that number and multiply it times the number of times you eat out per week. Many people eat out multiple times per week. I recently counseled a patient who didn't even own a refrigerator! You can whip up a healthy meal for far less than you would ever spend in a restaurant.

## SAVE TIME

Another plus is meal planning saves time. It may not seem that way, but time yourself! How long does it take to get in the car, wait in line, eat and return home? This can add up quickly.

## NUTRITION

Lastly and most importantly, let's think of nutrition. Most restaurants aren't using the leanest meats, low calorie sauces, and fresh produce, like you would at home, and processed frozen foods and boxed meals are full of sodium, fat and preservatives. You deserve the best nutrition for your health. By preparing meals at home, you guarantee this! It's time to change for you, your family and your long term health.



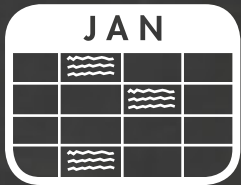
## 1. FIRST, YOU HAVE TO DECIDE THE LENGTH OF TIME YOU'RE PLANNING YOUR MEALS FOR.

For many, they plan a week in advance, but for others, this is too overwhelming. You may want to start with just planning a few days ahead or just a few meals ahead.



## 2. DO YOUR RESEARCH.

Check the sale advertisements and build your meals around them. For example, if chicken breasts are on sale, plan a meal or two using chicken this week. If you are really ambitious, try to match your coupons with the sale ads to save extra money. Next, take a quick look around your pantry. You may have some items stored away you can incorporate into a meal this week. For example, if you find frozen lean ground beef, consider using it for "Taco Tuesday" or "Meatloaf Monday."



## 3. ONCE YOU KNOW WHAT ITEMS ARE ON SALE AND WHAT'S IN YOUR PANTRY, LOOK AT YOUR SCHEDULE.

If you are planning for your evening meals, consider your evening activities. Many will require different kinds of meals. For example, on a soccer night, you may want to prepare a meal in a crock pot. On a lazy Sunday afternoon, you may choose a homemade soup. Also, think of lunches that need to be packed and breakfast options.



## 4. MAKE YOUR LIST AND START SHOPPING.

By starting with a list, you are more likely to buy what you need. If you shop without a list, people tend to buy more unnecessary items. This will also ensure you get what you need, and you don't have to make several trips to the store this week. What a time saver!



## 5. NOTIFY YOUR FAMILY OF THE PLAN.

In my kitchen, I have a dry erase board that shows what we are eating every night. I also list our family activities each day; therefore, we know what we are doing each evening. Make it a priority to eat together as well. Studies show that there are multiple benefits to eating as a family, such as decreased risk of obesity and even improved grades!

### PLAN VARIETY FOR YOUR MEALS

The plan can work, but people often complain they can't think of meal ideas or their family eats the same food every week. Getting out of the food rut your family is in can be a challenge but very important. If you prepare foods that are nutritious and tasty, there is less of a temptation to eat out. It's time to develop an arsenal of healthy, tasty menus! Don't get discouraged, it can take time. There are many Web sites you can visit to find new ideas such as:

- [www.cookinglight.com](http://www.cookinglight.com)
- [www.sparkrecipes.com](http://www.sparkrecipes.com)
- [www.eatingwell.com](http://www.eatingwell.com)
- [www.skinnytaste.com](http://www.skinnytaste.com)

Make it a vow to try one new main dish, salad or grain per week. If you find one you like, great! Have a three ring binder, computer file or even a recipe box to store all of your "go to" recipes. As you add more and more each week, you will develop a long list of possible entrees. Be brave and adventurous. This is a great way to expose your family to new foods and have them try new things. What a great way to develop healthy eaters.

# TIPS AND TRICKS

## USE FOODS TWICE

I'm not kidding. This can be a really efficient way to meal plan. First, let's talk about chicken. You may have two meals planned this week that use chicken, chicken and veggie stir fry and chicken noodle soup. Both of these calls for chicken, so when you prepare your chicken for the first meal, prepare it for the other meal as well. This seems crazy and takes a little planning, but it can be a huge time saver on a busy work night.

## PLAN AHEAD

Chop, prep and store when you have time. We all have busy nights and not so busy nights. On the slow nights, or the weekends, chop-up veggies for your lunch, prepare a fruit salad for the week, make sandwiches for your kids' lunches, and prepare tuna salad for the next night's dinner.

## DOUBLE PORTIONS

It doesn't take that much longer to make extra meals when you have the chance. For example, instead of making one lasagna, make two. Freeze this and use it on one of your busy days when you are pressed for time.

## FREEZE LEFTOVERS FOR QUICK LUNCHES

If you have just a little of your dinner left, freeze it and save it for a lunch. This can be your own personal frozen entrée and can be so much healthier! A serving of chili or a piece of lasagna can be a great lunch!

## FIND SUBSTITUTES FOR YOUR OLD FAVORITES

We all like greasy pizza, French fries and burgers. You certainly don't have to give them up. Look for ways to give your old favorites a make-over. Make a homemade pizza topped with lean ham and veggies or cut sweet potatoes into strips and bake!

Now, it's time to get started. Get out your pen, paper, and your laptop and start planning. Remember, progress is the key. You may only get one or two meals planned this week, but it's a start and one step closer to better health!

### **About the Author:**

*Sarah Muntel, RD, is the Bariatric Coordinator at Community Bariatric Surgeons in Indianapolis, IN. She has 15 years of experience working with bariatric patients and loves to work with people as they change their lives and improve their health. Her favorite part of her job is her weekly Support Group. In her free time, Sarah enjoys spending time with her husband and three children.*



# ABOUT THE OBESITY ACTION COALITION (OAC)

The Obesity Action Coalition (OAC) is a National non-profit organization dedicated to giving a voice to individuals affected by obesity and helping them along their journey toward better health. Our core focuses are to elevate the conversation of weight and its impact on health, improve access to obesity care, provide science-based education on obesity and its treatments, and fight to eliminate weight bias and discrimination.



VIBRANT COMMUNITY



NATIONAL AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS



ANNUAL CONVENTION



ADVOCACY



PUBLIC EDUCATION

## LEARN, CONNECT, ENGAGE

The OAC knows that the journey with weight can be challenging but we also know that great things happen when we learn, connect and engage. That is why the OAC Community exists. Our Community is designed to provide quality education, ongoing support programs, an opportunity to connect, and a place to take action on important issues.

### Through the OAC Community, you can get access to:

- Weight & Health Education • Community Blogs
  - Community Discussion Forum
  - Ongoing Support • Meaningful Connections
- AND MUCH MORE**



**JOIN TODAY: GO TO [OBESITYACTION.ORG/JOIN](http://OBESITYACTION.ORG/JOIN)**

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