

Healthy Eating for One or Two

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Food and Nutrition Series | **Health**

by L. Bellows, R. Moore, and A. Gross*

In recent decades, eating alone has become nearly as common as eating with friends and family. In fact during 2012, approximately 46% of all meals were eaten alone in the United States. For those who are more likely to eat alone (college students, older adults, or those with a busy school or work schedule) preparing a small meal may seem like a great deal of work. Oftentimes recipes serve at least four, require a variety of ingredients, and leave leftovers that may be wasted. These problematic factors have led to the growing availability of fast foods, pre-packaged meals, and in-between meal snacks, which are marketed as cheaper and faster options for busy individuals and families. However, these easy, quick, and sometimes highly processed meals are often less healthy due to high levels of sodium (salt), sugar, and fat. Research also shows that for many, eating meals alone may lead to high calorie consumption. Older adults on the other hand, may have trouble consuming enough calories. These findings reinstate the importance of eating healthy balanced meals and nutrient dense snacks to maintain optimal health.

Preparing meals for one or two can be easy and enjoyable, by planning ahead and making meals simple. Additionally, many manufacturers now cater to the single diner with healthy pre-packaged individual serving foods to help create well-balanced meals.

Planning Ahead

The easiest way to prepare a meal for one or two is to plan ahead. It is important to keep a variety of staple foods on hand in order to be prepared with all necessary ingredients when cooking a meal. Planning ahead also includes cooking meals that can be frozen and reheated later, when there is limited time to prepare an entire meal.

*L. Bellows, Colorado State University Extension food and nutrition specialist and assistant professor; R. Moore, graduate student; A. Gross, undergraduate student.
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Important Tips for Planning Ahead

At the grocery store:

Purchase dry items in bulk: Regularly consumed foods (such as cereal, oatmeal, rice, pasta, beans, and legumes) that are purchased in bulk, can be a cost-effective choice for many consumers. These dry food items can be easily divided into one or two servings.

Purchase fresh foods in small amounts: Foods such as dairy, meat, fruits, and vegetables should be purchased in small amounts so that the item can be consumed or frozen before it expires.

Purchase foods with a long shelf-life: Pre-packaged salad greens, frozen meat, canned vegetables (low sodium), and dried fruits, are healthy examples of items with a long shelf-life.

Purchase single-servings: Individually wrapped items will extend the life of certain foods and allow for portability (examples include cheese, milk, yogurt, and fruit). Though these items might initially be more expensive compared to bulk items, greater savings will be seen in the long run due to less wasted food.

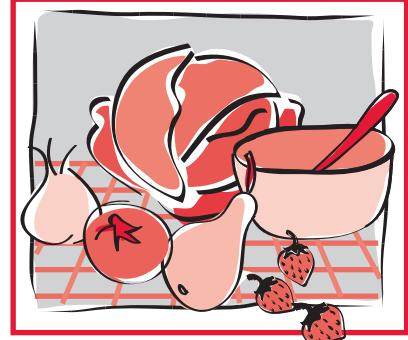
Keep frequently used ingredients on hand: Herbs, spices, sauces, and condiments, are important ingredients to keep in the kitchen that can be used in many recipes.

At home:

Preserve foods by freezing, refrigerating, canning, or dehydrating: These methods are all effective at preserving foods, especially if an item cannot be eaten in a safe and reasonable amount of time.

Build your cookware collection: Have on hand a frying pan, or learn how to grill, broil, or roast different foods. These skills are valuable for making small meals with great flavor.

Plan leftovers accordingly: Plan leftovers so the only step is to simply re-heat the food item. Meals that make great leftovers include lasagna, enchiladas, or casserole, which can also be frozen for long periods of time.



Quick Facts

- Cooking meals for one or two at home can be easy and enjoyable.
- Plan ahead, and keep a variety of healthy foods on hand to prepare fresh meals and snacks.
- Build your meals by using the USDA website *ChooseMyPlate*, and the *SuperTracker* tool.
- Refrigerate leftovers within two hours of preparation.



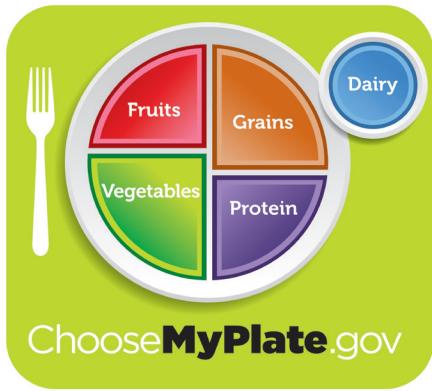


Figure 1: USDA ChooseMyPlate.

Balancing Meals

The USDA website, ChooseMyPlate.gov, serves as a useful guide for making daily food choices and building balanced meals. This website illustrates the five food groups and emphasizes enjoying food but eating less, and avoiding oversized portions. MyPlate recommends making half of one's plate fruits and vegetables, and the other half grains (at least half should be whole grains) and protein (from varied sources), as well as adding fat-free or low-fat dairy on the side. The website also includes the SuperTracker tool, to help individuals plan, analyze, and track food intake and physical activity.

Using the framework for MyPlate, an example of a balanced meal containing all food groups could include a turkey sandwich with a few slices of cheese, lettuce (or salad mix), and tomatoes, along with an apple. A few baby carrots or pre-packaged carrot sticks on the side will boost vegetable intake by adding additional vitamins, minerals, and fiber to the meal. Another example includes a plate of cooked pasta with spaghetti sauce, grated Parmesan

cheese, and cooked lean ground beef. This meal, complemented with a side of canned peaches or dried apricots, has selections from each food group. Fresh tomatoes, onions, green peppers, or mushrooms can also be added to the sauce for more flavor and extra vegetables. A similar meal could be built using tortillas or rice in place of pasta, along with vegetables, fruits, and meat, beans or eggs with yogurt or a glass of milk.

See Table 1 for examples of meals that fit the USDA's dietary guidelines for all five food groups.

Eating Away from Home

Healthy Snacks

A busy lifestyle can often lead to the occasional skipped or shortened meal. In these cases, healthy in-between meal snacks can play a very important role in providing valuable nutrients to help maintain a balanced diet. Snacks can be quick and easy to prepare, and are a convenient option when eating away from home. Healthful snack ideas include cut-up fruit with peanut butter, yogurt and berries, dried fruit, cut-up vegetables, whole-grain cereal, popcorn (salt and butter free), low-fat cheese, or mixed nuts. Stick to whole, fresh foods, and avoid snacks that are processed or high in sodium, sugar, or dietary fat (such as chips, cookies, or candy).

Eating Out

Eating meals away from home is a reality in today's society, especially for those with busy schedules. Restaurants offer a variety of meal options which may create confusion when trying to make a healthy choice.

Shelf Life

Foods that are canned, frozen, dried, or pre-packaged, often have a longer shelf-life than fresh foods. When cooking for one or two, these products may be a cost-effective choice. However, it is important to examine the nutrition label closely and choose items with appropriate levels of sodium, sugar, fat, and overall calorie content. When purchasing canned or pre-packaged fruits, look for labels with 100% juice, and avoid added sugars. Before preparing canned vegetables, beans, or lentils, always rinse with water to lower salt content. Whenever possible select fresh, natural foods or items that are minimally processed.

Tips for Eating Out

- Be mindful of portion size. Many restaurants serve large portion sizes which may translate to more calories, sugar, and fat. Consider taking part of the meal to-go, or sharing with a friend.
- Limit condiment use—especially sauces and dressings. Request these items on the side.
- Choose foods that are grilled, broiled, or steamed, instead of fried.
- When given a choice of side dishes, choose fruits, vegetables, or low-fat dairy options, instead of fried foods or chips.
- Drink water, or low-fat dairy beverages instead of drinks with added sugar.
- Share dessert with a friend, or order fruit instead.

Table 1. Sample daily meal plan that includes all five food groups.*

These meals also take into account portion size, use of health fats, and low sodium options.

	Sample Meals	Fruit	Vegetable	Grains	Protein	Dairy	Healthy Fat
Breakfast	Oatmeal with fruit and walnuts and scrambled egg with bell pepper	Blueberries, raspberries, blackberries	Bell pepper	Oatmeal	Walnuts, egg	6 ounce glass of non-fat milk	Walnuts, eggs
Lunch	Tuna Sandwich	Tomatoes, medium apple	Lettuce or salad mix.	Whole-grain bread	Tuna	Low-fat cheese	Lean fish
Dinner	Curried Chicken with raisins and mushrooms	Raisins	Mushrooms, red bell pepper	Whole-grain rice	Boneless, skinless chicken	Fat-free milk	Olive oil

*See the USDA website, ChooseMyPlate, for additional sample menus and healthy recipes: <http://www.choosemyplate.gov/healthy-eating-tips/sample-menus-recipes.html>

- Order some carrot sticks and celery with ranch dressing and eat your veggies as an appetizer. While it might not be on the menu, most restaurants are happy to accommodate.

Reducing Recipes

Most recipes have the potential to be cut in half or in thirds. Some ingredients, like an egg for example, are difficult to divide. If the recipe calls for a large egg, try using a small egg or just the egg white to cut the recipe in half. In some cases, it may be easier to make the entire recipe and freeze the rest for later. For easy references, see Table 2.

Store Food Safely

All uneaten food should be stored safely and properly. Food storage containers such as thick plastic bags or shallow plastic containers, are important to have on hand in order to store any leftovers safely in the refrigerator or freezer. Leftovers should be refrigerated/frozen within two hours.

Table 2. Reducing Recipes*

Half of a Recipe	
When the recipe calls for	Use
1/4 cup	2 tablespoons
1/3 cup	2 tablespoons + 2 teaspoons
1/2 cup	1/4 cup
2/3 cup	1/3 cup
3/4 cup	6 tablespoons
1 tablespoon	1 1/2 teaspoon
1 teaspoon	1/2 teaspoon
1/2 teaspoon	1/4 teaspoon
9x2x13-inch pan	Square 8 x 2-inch or Round 9 x 2-inch
Third of a Recipe	
1/4 cup	1 tablespoon + 1 teaspoon
1/3 cup	1 tablespoon + 2 1/3 teaspoons
1/2 cup	2 tablespoons + 2 teaspoons

*Cooking times, temperature, pan size, and seasonings may vary when certain recipes are scaled. Closely monitor the food to determine whether any alterations are necessary.

Make Mealtimes Enjoyable

Create a pleasant setting for dining at home by listening to relaxing music, turning off the television or other electronic devices, choosing a pleasant location, or setting the table with flowers and candles. Invite friends or family over for meals, or host a potluck dinner.

Summary

Whether you are preparing one or two servings of a home-cooked meal, planning ahead for tomorrow's lunch at work, or deciding which restaurant to dine at tonight, use these tips to help make meal planning easy and convenient. Table 3 describes some staple items to consider keeping in your kitchen.

Additional Resources

The Mayo Clinic—Healthy Cooking for 1 or 2: www.mayoclinic.com/health/healthy-cooking/HQ00474

Cooking For One—Easy Cook Small Bowl Recipes. By Josie Hamilton (2012).

CSU Extension fact sheets:

- [Food Storage for Safety and Quality](#)
- [Updating Food Preparation to Promote Health](#)
- [Ingredient Substitutions](#)
- [Understanding the Food Label](#)

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Table 3. Examples of important items to keep on-hand in the kitchen.

Cookware	Frying pan, casserole dish, medium pots, mixing bowls, loaf pan, measuring cups and spoons, strainer, spatula, and can-opener.
Appliances	Toaster oven, crockpot, blender, rice cooker, microwave.
Staple Food Items (long shelf-life, shop for infrequently)	Whole-grains (rice, pasta, couscous, quinoa, oatmeal, cereal), dried or canned beans and lentils, canned vegetables (low sodium), nuts, dried fruit, nut butter (peanut, almond, sunflower), olive oil, herbs, and spices.
Perishable Food Items (short shelf-life, shop for frequently)	Eggs, low-fat or fat-free dairy, fresh fruits and vegetables, and proteins such as meat and fish.
Food Storage	Plastic containers, glass containers, aluminum foil, and plastic bags.

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