

Planning for Healthier Meals

When you juggle work, evening activities and quality time with family and friends, making a healthy, home-cooked meal sometimes sounds like a hobby rather than a reality. However, you might find the process becomes more efficient with a little preparation. Meal planning can help you eat a balanced diet all week long.



Here are a few strategies to help you get started:

Plan ahead. One of the biggest challenges of cooking is the process of shopping for your ingredients. Creating a plan before the week begins can help you minimize your shopping trips. Map out a handful of healthier recipes you might like to try and write them down. Make a complete list of the ingredients you will need for these meals. When shopping, challenge yourself to stick to this grocery list and only purchase the ingredients you need. Planning ahead also gives you the freedom to prepare extra servings to use leftovers as another meal, such as lunch at work or school. Cook once; eat twice.

Cook in large batches. Prepare larger batches of ingredients ahead of time to be used in meals throughout the week, such as brown rice or chopped and sautéed vegetables. Try making your own soup stocks or recipe sauces ahead of time to make cooking efficient.

Befriend your freezer. Freeze any leftovers you might not eat in the coming days or make your own, healthy freezer meals. Some quick examples include soups, stews and slow-cooker meals.

Stock up. When you're at the grocery store, stock up on healthy staples, such as olive oil; vinegar; brown rice or other whole grains, like quinoa or bulgur; or frozen, plain veggies and fruits. These items can be used for several different dishes.

Find flavor with healthy options. Keep sodium-free or low-sodium seasonings on hand, such as dried herbs, minced garlic and lemon juice to season food, rather than using salt or store-bought sauces. Challenge yourself to mix up your own salad dressing by using a combination of olive oil, apple cider vinegar, garlic and herbs. If you must have salad dressing, look for low-sugar options.

Stick to the back-to-back rule. It's OK to dine out on occasion; just try to stick to the back-to-back rule. Avoid eating two unhealthy meals back to back. If you plan to dine out, select the healthier options on the menu (ask your server for guidance) or try splitting a meal with someone to ensure you consume a healthy portion or event ask for a carryout box and split your portion before you start eating. Planning your

meals and grocery shopping for the week can be cheaper than eating at restaurants. For example, preparing a homemade chicken dinner can provide the ingredients to make other meals during the week, such as chicken salad for lunch or simply leftovers for your family another night.

Consider a healthy meal delivery subscription. For those looking to eat better, healthy meal home delivery options provide the guidance of a cooking class – in your own kitchen. Popular options like *Blue Apron*, *Green Chef* and *HelloFresh* allow you to select meal options from their website and they package and send you the ingredients needed to prepare the healthy meal.

Take advantage of online grocery shopping. Another option for expediting your healthy weeknight meals is ordering your groceries online. Some sellers include *Thrive Market*, *Amazon Prime Pantry* and *Door to Door Organics*. Some stores also offer convenience pickup services – simply order your groceries online and stop by the store for your collected items.

New Beginning in March: Reporting is now easier than ever! Check out the new calendar reporting enhancement that allows you to report your physical activity a week at a time! See example below:

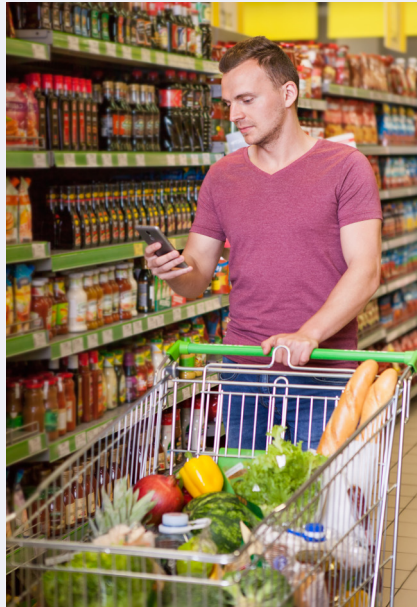
	Mon 12/19	Tue 12/20	Wed 12/21	Thu 12/22	Fri 12/23	Sat 12/24	Sun 12/24	Even
CARDIO (minutes)	30 ✓	20	20	20				\$1.00/day \$8.00/week
STRENGTH (minutes)	30 ✓	15	20 ✓	10				\$1.00/day \$8.00/week
STRETCHING (minutes)	10 ✓	0	15 ✓	0				\$1.00/day \$8.00/week
STEPS	10000 ✓	4000	4000	4000				\$1.00/day \$8.00/week

Healthy Grocery Shopping Tips

Armed with a little grocery store wisdom, you can outsmart the store aisles and successfully find the healthiest options. For example, some experts have a saying: “Eye level is buy level.” Often, the more expensive and featured, name-brand products reside here. These options aren’t always the healthiest. You can find generic or store brand products, which can be less expensive, and sometimes healthier, on the bottom shelves.

Here are some additional wise shopping tips you might try:

- Use a smartphone app to help you create and stick to your shopping list.
- Stick to the perimeter of the store.
- Shop locally and seasonally when possible.
- Read the label.
- Aim for more whole foods and fewer highly processed foods.



Minimally Processed Foods: These are fresh foods that are pre-prepped for convenience. Foods like bagged spinach, cut vegetables and roasted nuts fall in this category.

Peak Processed Foods: Foods that are processed at their peak freshness offer the best nutritional value and include items like canned beans and tomatoes, frozen fruits and vegetables, and canned tuna.

Processed With Added Ingredients: Some foods are processed with added ingredients for flavor and texture, such as sweeteners, spices, oils, colors and preservatives. These foods include items like jarred pasta sauce, salad dressing, and cake mixes.

Ready-to-Eat Foods: The foods that you generally find on the inside aisles of a grocery store tend to be more heavily processed and include items like crackers, granola mix or deli meat.

Highly Processed Foods: These frozen or pre-made meals, such as frozen pizza and microwaveable dinners are among the most processed items.

COURSE SPOTLIGHT: *Understanding Nutrition Labels*

Take a step to improve your nutrition and overall health this month by taking the **SouthernLifeStyle Rewards** featured education course ***Understanding Nutrition Labels!*** Learn how to interpret nutrition labels and earn \$10 in your HRA/TSA account.

New: Find Healthy Recipes on the Resources Tab

Interested in some new and healthy recipes? Click on the Resources tab today and find easy and family-friendly healthy recipes to prepare at home this month!

COMING SOON! Get Ready for the Choose This Not That Challenge

This April, participate in the **SouthernLifeStyle Rewards** *Choose This Not That Challenge!* Report your healthy choices throughout the month and earn \$10 in your HRA/TSA account when you complete the challenge!