

Menu Planning Basics



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Introduction

Have you ever heard this before? “Mom, What’s for dinner? I’m STARVING!” Or perhaps, “Honey, I’m home – When will dinner be ready?” It is the dinner hour – often times everyone is tired and hungry and you have no idea what to make. This entire situation can add stress to your evening. You have to either A.) Quickly pull something together, or B.) Spend a good chunk of money to eat out.

The good news is, I are here to help make your evening meals easy, organized and less stressful. How does that sound? Wonderful I hope! And the good news is this isn’t rocket science – anyone can do it – I’ll give you all the tools you need.

So grab a glass of lemonade, cuddle up in your favorite chair and get ready for relaxing and enjoyable family meals in the very near future.



Christine Steendahl
“The Menu Mom”

P.S. Once you’re convinced that menu planning can help you and your family, be sure to give our pre-made menus and our exclusive “My Menu Maker” online software a try!

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Why Menu Planning Is A Terrible Idea

First off, I don't want to waste your time if menu planning just isn't right for you. Therefore, I have compiled eight reasons why you might not be interested in menu planning, that I want to share with you right away.

1. You enjoy eating unhealthy fast-food three to five times per week.
2. You love the taste of pre-packaged preservative packed frozen convenience food.
3. Spending \$200 and 2 hours at the grocery store, only to come home to discover that there is nothing to cook for dinner is one of your favorite things to do.
4. You enjoy the stress of running around like crazy at dinner time trying to figure out what to cook while your children and husband are hungry and crabby.
5. You like your food rut of spaghetti, hot dogs, pizza, repeat.
6. You have no other way to spend the extra \$100 you spend each week eating out.
7. You have nothing better to do at 5 o'clock every day than to go to the grocery store. It's enjoyable to daily spend extra money on groceries as additional items "fall" into your cart.
8. You have no desire to enjoy a home cooked meal around the dinner table with your family. You feel spending time with your family is a complete waste of time.

If you agree with the above statements you probably do not want to try menu planning – it is probably not going to work out for you. On the other hand, if you possibly disagree with at least one of the above statements, it is time to give menu planning a try!

What Exactly Is Meal Planning?

Simply put, menu planning is writing down what your family is going to eat for the week, developing a grocery shopping list with the necessary items for the menu, grocery shopping once per week, and preparing the meals you have chosen. Sounds simple enough right? (If not, don't worry, we're going to help you make it simple.)

Benefits of Menu Planning

1) Get Dinner On The Table Faster

If you know what you are going to fix for dinner, and you have everything you need at your fingertips, getting the food on the table becomes a snap. You don't have to stop at the store on your way home, to pick up something to cook. If you are stuck at the office, and your spouse knows what's on the menu for the night – he or she can get started without you.

2) Run To The Store Less Often

How many times do you run to the grocery store to buy something to cook for dinner. I don't know about you, but it takes me at least 45 minutes every time I do that. Menu planning allows you to get all your shopping done once a week, and make sure you have what you need to prepare every single dinner for the week.

3) You'll Eat Better

You have the best intentions to prepare wholesome, healthy meals for your family. Then you get home late, everyone is hungry and there is nothing in the fridge. You head for takeout or call the pizza delivery guy. If you plan your meals and have what you need at home you are much more likely to actually cook all those healthy dishes for your family.

4) It Saves You Money

How much food do you throw out each week because you just didn't get around to cooking it? Plus every time you go to the store there are a few extra things that just make their way into your cart and on your grocery bill. If you shop less and only for those items that you actually need, you spend a lot less money on groceries each week. We won't even think about how much we spend eating out each week.

5) It Saves You Time

In addition to saving you money, meal planning also saves you time. You only have to go grocery shopping once a week, and there is no more walking around the kitchen each evening for 20 minutes frantically trying to figure out what's for dinner tonight. Everything you need from the recipe to the ingredients is right at your fingertips.

6) Quality Family Time

When you think back to your own childhood, family dinner is sure to come to mind as a time when everyone got together to eat a meal and talk about the day. You can recreate that experience for your family and spend some quality time each week over a home-cooked meal.

7) It Is Easy

Last, but not least, menu planning is easy to do and makes it easy to cook every day. All you need to do is set a little time each week to plan out your weekly menu, write up your grocery list and shop.

How to Plan Your Meals

Take a week or so to brainstorm your family's favorite meals. Start a list and maybe post it in a prominent place – such as your refrigerator door, so all family members can add things to the list as they think of them.

Once you have a list of favorites, sit down and write the days of the week on a sheet of paper. For each day assign one family favorite meal. Don't forget to add side dishes also. It is good at this point to look at the family calendar as well. This will help you be sure to not plan something that takes an hour to prepare if you have to be somewhere early in the evening. Or maybe Chad will be gone one night for dinner, and there is a specific meal that everyone likes except Chad. You can plan that meal for the evening he is away. Or maybe you have been invited out one evening – you certainly don't need to plan a meal for that night if that is the case. Also decide if you want to plan in a leftover night sometime during the week.

Trying New Recipes

We encourage you to pull out your cookbooks (yeah, those dusty things on the bookshelf or in the back of your cupboard, that one thing you got as a wedding gift and never looked at... yeah, that's the one!) Take a look at your cookbook or even look online for new recipes. You're not going to want to try a new recipe every night, as that can get taxing quickly on you and your family. However, if you can try something new 1-2 times per week that will help you not tire of eating the same foods over and over again. Just remember to print out that recipe or bookmark it in your cookbook so you can find it when you are ready to cook. If your family enjoys it, add it to your family favorite list with a note next to it telling you where to find the recipe next time (page number in the cookbook, folder you add the recipe to etc.). If it does not become a family favorite, make a little note in your cookbook so you don't try the same one again later. If you try new recipes at least once a week, your normal list of family favorite meals will grow in time.

Making Out Your Shopping List

Once you have your meals planned out, it is time to make the grocery shopping list. Go through each recipe and side dish you have written down and place on your grocery list all the ingredients necessary that you do not have on hand to make the meal.

Remember, the goal is to only go to the grocery store once each week. So once you have all the ingredients listed for your evening meals, take inventory of the basics such as milk, bread, eggs, etc. and add those to the list, if needed, as well. It is also a good idea to keep a running list all week of items you need as you run out of them. This will make the basics list easier and will help you not forget anything.

Next, add any breakfast, lunch, or dessert ingredients or items you may need for the week.

Finally, you may want to look through the grocery ad to see if there is anything on sale that you generally use and would like to stock up on. You can also add that to your list at this time.

It is generally easiest to organize your list by department in the grocery store, for example, all the dairy products on one area of your list, all the produce in another column etc. This will save you time when you are at the store as you won't have to run from one end to the other because you missed something that was "hiding" on your list.

We have provided you with a sample menu planning sheet and grocery list toward the end of this e-book. If they work for you, you are welcome to run off as many copies as you need.

Saving Money with Menu Planning

Have you ever looked back at the end of the month and added up your grocery bills and dining out receipts for the month? Try it one of these months – it can be downright scary! However, when you do this it is also very eye-opening, so do give it a try. Just save all your receipts (make sure to ask for them when you dine out) and put them in an envelope. At the end of the month total them up and see what you discover.

I think you might also be surprised how much those quick “run in and run out” trips to the grocery store add up as extra items seem to “jump” into your shopping cart. Unless you are incredibly disciplined, I am willing to bet that most of us come out with at least a few more items than we go in for each time. So only shopping once a week is most certainly going to save you money.

How about dining out? Even if you only eat out once a week, (and I know for a fact many families eat out much more than that) you are probably spending \$80 a month on dining out (and that is a conservative estimate) Even just going to McDonalds with an average size family can be close to \$20 these days.

It can also be very helpful to watch the sales and stock up on items you frequently use when the sale is running. You can then plan your meals around the items you have on hand.

If you add up the money you save from dining out less, grocery shopping less, and buying during sales, you will have a nice lump of pocket change. It should not be hard to save AT LEAST \$100 per month following these methods. What can you do with an extra \$100 a month? Put it in a vacation fund? Pay off a bill? Save for your child’s college? It’s up to you, but I think there are some things you would rather be putting the money towards when you pull it all into perspective.

Saving Time with Menu Planning

Most all of us are on tight schedules. If you're not, then I'm sure you still would rather spend your time doing something else instead of spending hours a day frantically trying to feed your family. I know I can think of ways I would spend my time if I had more free time.

Menu planning has the potential to save you quite a bit of time each week. How much time does it take you to run to the grocery store each time? Maybe 10 minutes to drive there and back and at least 30 minutes in the store. That is close to an hour and you still haven't cooked anything yet. How many times a week do you run to the store?

How about searching through your cupboards, the freezer, the fridge, the cookbook etc. to try to figure out what you can make with what you have on hand? How long does that take? Probably at least 15 minutes by the time you have nailed down what you are going to make, maybe defrosted the meat in the microwave etc. That's almost 2 hours a week!

How about dining out? If you have young children, first you have to get them ready to go. That generally takes about 10 minutes at our house by the time they go potty, find their shoes etc. Actually, sometimes it takes that long just to get your spouse out the door. Then you have to drive to the restaurant – another 10 minutes probably. Then you sit and look at the menu and wait to order – another 10-15 minutes. Then you have to wait for the food to cook – another 10-15 minutes. Then you eat 15-20 minutes. Then you wait for and pay your bill - 10 minutes. Then you drive home – 10 minutes. That is 80 minutes (if you're lucky). I can think of a lot of meals that can be prepared and consumed in much less time.

If you feel like you are always short on time, we have just potentially given you several extra hours each week just by incorporating menu planning into your lifestyle.

Rediscovering the Family Dinner

When you were growing up, did your family have dinner around the dinner table each evening? If not, you at least probably knew a family who did. It used to be the norm for families to gather together each evening to share a meal and talk with each other.

Today it is more probable to find dad coming home from work late, kids shuffling from one activity to the next, moms often working outside of the home etc. We're busy these days. However, that doesn't mean we should push aside the idea of a family meal. It is more important now than ever, and if you make it a priority and put your new menu planning skills into action, it can be done.

Consider these facts:

- The average parent spends 38.5 minutes per week in meaningful conversation with their children... (A.C. Nielsen Co.)
- Family dinners are more important than play, story time and other family events in the development of vocabulary of younger children. (Harvard Research, 1996)
- Frequent family meals are associated with a lower risk of smoking, drinking and using marijuana; with a lower incidence of depressive symptoms and suicidal thoughts; and with better grades in 11 to 18 year olds. (Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine, 2004.)
- The more often teens have dinner with their parents, the less time they spend with boyfriends or girlfriends, and the less likely they are to have sexually active friends. (National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University – 2004)
- Adolescent girls who have frequent family meals, and a positive atmosphere during those meals, are less likely to have eating disorders. (University of Minnesota, 2004)

We've given you the tools, we've given you the facts – it's time for you to take ACTION! Give menu planning a try and reap the positive rewards.

Sample Menu Planning Sheet & Grocery List

With this basic menu planning guide, you are also given a sample menu planning sheet and grocery list. Print those out each week and use them to plan your menu and to make sure you get everything you need for each dish at the store.

Here are the links to the Menu Planning and Grocery List printables.

Grocery List

<http://www.menuplanningcentral.com/shopping-list.pdf>

Weekly Menu

<http://www.menuplanningcentral.com/weekly-menu.pdf>

Both these files are pdf files. To download them to your computer, simply right click the link and choose “Save Target As”.

You will need Adobe Reader to view these files. Most computers already have this reader installed. If yours doesn't, you can download it free at www.adobe.com

Resources

Let's face it... while menu planning saves you a lot of time and money, it isn't exactly the most fun thing to do each week for some people. Just the thought of having to sit down and come up with recipes week in and week out and then compiling them all into one grocery list is perhaps what is keeping you from planning your meals ahead of time.

Hi, my name is Christine Steendahl, and I am known as "The Menu Mom". I sat down and came up with not one, but 3 different types of menus for the entire month. Each of these menus comes complete with recipes and a categorized grocery list that makes grocery shopping fast and simple.



- **Family Friendly Menus**

4 weekly menus that everyone in the family is sure to love. Not only do you receive 7 dinner recipes complete with side dishes, but also 2 brunch ideas and 2 weeknight desserts. Each menu comes complete with the recipes for each dish and a weekly grocery list.

- **Healthy Menus**

Whether you're watching your weight, are dealing with a health issue that requires you to eat healthy, or just want to feel better, this healthy menu is just what you've been looking for. You get 4 weeks worth of healthy dinner ideas along with healthy sides. Of course recipes and weekly grocery lists are included.

- **Vegetarian Menus**

Does your family stick to a vegetarian diet, or you just like to have a few vegetarian dishes in your menu each week? Then this menu mailer is for you with 4 weeks worth of vegetarian recipes and of course a categorized grocery list for each week.

- **Frugal Menu**

Are you on a tight budget? Our frugal menus help you feed your family for less, as you keep your grocery bill in check. Each month we include 4 weeks worth of frugal menus along with the corresponding grocery lists.

I would like to offer you 4 weekly menus of each of these four options. That's a total of **16 weekly menus** complete with recipes and shopping lists. We will also include a couple of extra special bonuses that you can learn about using the link below.

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