

When Crunched For Time, Let Crock Pot Do The Cooking

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When time is short and your "to do" list is long, it's easy to grab a meal at the nearest drive-through window. However, frequent visits to fast-food restaurants can be hard on your health and your wallet. Planning and preparing nutritious meals doesn't have to take a lot of time. The first step is organization.

Kitchen arrangement - make sure food items, utensils, and equipment are arranged conveniently for fast-paced work.

Adequate food supply - keep your food cabinets, refrigerator, and freezer stocked with quick-to-fix ingredients that can be used in a variety of ways (an assortment of canned and frozen vegetables, ground beef, fish fillets, and chicken, for example).

Meal ideas - try to plan at least some meals in advance. This can be as simple as making a mental note of what you will have for dinner tomorrow or defrosting a meat so it will be ready to prepare.

Shopping lists - keep a piece of paper near the refrigerator for jotting down items as you need them. Use it as the basis for a complete shopping list. The next step is to use time-saving strategies.

Focus preparation efforts on one portion of the meal. There is no need for all meal components to be elaborate. For example, if the main dish requires a lot of attention, fix a simple vegetable or salad. If the main dish is a simply prepared meat, dress up the vegetables or add an interesting side dish.

Do some preparation steps ahead of time. Thaw frozen meat, fish, or poultry in the microwave oven or overnight in the refrigerator. University of Florida/IFAS nutrition and food safety specialists do not recommend thawing meat on the countertop. The outer layer of the meat can warm to room temperature, where bacteria can quickly multiply, before the inside thaws.

Assemble equipment, cooking utensils, and ingredients before you start meal preparation. Use time-saving food preparation methods. To save total preparation time, try quick microwave or stove versions of dishes you usually cook in the oven, such as skillet lasagna or microwave cornbread. One-dish meals also save cleanup time.

Get others to help. Have your children or other household members help with simple food preparation steps, setting and clearing the table, or washing dishes.

Collect quick and easy menu ideas and recipes. Jot down whole menus as well as recipes. Look for recipes that have a few ingredients.

Be efficient. When you do have time to cook, make your efforts count. On weekends, for example, if you prepare pancakes, waffles, or French toast for breakfast, make a double or triple batch and freeze the extras. Make extra soup, stews, chili, or spaghetti sauce and freeze in meal-size portions. Double your meatloaf recipe and freeze half the uncooked meat mixture as patties or meatballs to use later. Or, freeze some in muffin tins to make mini-loaves.

Brown several pounds of ground beef or turkey at one time and freeze in one-pound packages. Just thaw the amount needed, add the remaining ingredients for your recipe, and your meal is ready.

Brown ground beef and turkey in the microwave oven. Cook on high for five to six minutes or until the internal temperature of the meat reaches 165°F degrees. To reduce fat content, brown meat in a microwaveable colander placed inside a larger casserole dish. The fat will drain into the outer dish and the meat is ready to use in your recipe.

Let your crockpot do the work – assemble your main dish in the morning or the night before and store in the refrigerator. Put it on before you leave for work and come home to a savory aroma to tantalize your tastebuds. Add a salad or side dish and whole wheat rolls and dinner is served in a matter of minutes.

Here is an easy crockpot main dish:

CRAZY CROCKPOT PORK CHOPS

4 loin chops, lean
2 medium onions, sliced
Spices of your choice
1 teaspoon olive oil
Salt and pepper to taste

Place chops, which have been sprinkled with salt, pepper, and spices of your choice, in crock pot. Cover with the onion slices, separated into rings. Place olive oil on top and cook on low heat for six to eight hours or until chops are tender and onions are done. The result is moist, tender chops with a deep brown color, as if broiled in the oven. Serves 4.

Try this fast recipe for chicken and yellow rice. Add a green vegetable and you have a complete meal in about 30 minutes.

CHICKEN AND YELLOW RICE

1 10-ounce pkg. yellow rice dinner mix
20 ounces hot tap water
2-3 tablespoons olive oil
2 5-ounce cans chicken or turkey

Combine contents of package, hot water, olive oil, and canned chicken or turkey in a 2-quart microwave-safe casserole dish. Cover and microwave on HIGH 3 minutes. Reduce to 50 percent power and microwave 20-22 minutes longer or until most of the water is absorbed. Remove and let stand for 5 minutes. Fluff and serve. Serves 4-6.

Note: This dish also can be prepared on the stovetop. Follow package directions.

This main dish can be cooking while you are helping the kids with homework or going through the mail.

ITALIAN CHICKEN

8 chicken breasts, boneless and skinless

4 tomatoes, quartered

1 pkg. dry onion soup mix

1 - 8-ounce bottle fat-free Italian dressing

8 ounces mushrooms, sliced

1/2 teaspoon oregano

2 bay leaves

Preheat oven to 350°F degrees. Place tomatoes in a 9 X 13-inch baking dish. Top with mushrooms then boneless chicken. Combine dressing, soup mix, oregano, and bay leaves. Pour sauce over chicken and vegetables. Bake for 60-75 minutes.

Have a question? Contact the University of Florida IFAS - Washington/Holmes Counties Extension office at (850)638-6265, weekdays 8 a.m. to noon or 1 to 5 p.m.

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