

Try These Fast-Food Tips At Home

Tallahassee Democrat

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When time is short and your "To Do" list is long, it is 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 does not have to take a lot of time. The first step is organization.

Kitchen arrangement - make sure foods, 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 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.

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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