

## Once-a-Month Cooking Makes Weeknights Easier

Tallahassee Democrat

Judy Corbus, Extension Agent, Washington/Holmes Counties Extension Service—Family & Consumer Sciences

### ONCE A MONTH COOKING

When you're tired at the end of the day and fresh out of dinner ideas, wouldn't it be nice to have a month's worth of meals waiting for you in the freezer? With once a month cooking, you spend one day a month cooking and freezing meals for future use. The technique can be modified by preparing triple batches for a few weeks or spreading the cooking over two or three days.

Begin by selecting and grouping recipes. Many of your favorite recipes will freeze well; you also can locate freezer recipes online or check out books from the library. After you have chosen your recipes, group them according to ingredients. For example, you can cook a large batch of chicken for enchiladas, casseroles, or fajitas. Make your shopping list and organize by store sections. Purchase all food items – look for sales and use coupons.

Next, plan one or two days to cook. Organize your work space the night before by putting recipes in plastic bags and taping to the cabinet doors. Create combined work areas for dishes using similar ingredients. Gather cooking dishes, storage items, marking pens, etc. Cook large items, such as chicken. On food preparation day, combine similar tasks then divide the food. For example, chop onions for all dishes, shred cheese, and cook all the ground beef except for any needed for raw meat dishes like meatloaf. Keep raw and cooked foods separated and clean hands, utensils, and work spaces with hot soapy water after working with raw meat, poultry, and fish.

Create assembly lines; prepare dishes together that use similar food items. Package foods in good quality freezer bags, freezer paper, or freezer containers; wrap items tightly, and remove as much air as possible. Using masking tape on freezer containers or a sharpie marker on freezer bags, label all food items with the name, date prepared, and preparation instructions. Tape the recipe in the plastic bag to the food, if needed.

Clean out the freezer to make room. Combine foods needed for the same recipe and tape together. For example, if a dish calls for one-half cup grated cheese to be added during the last 10 minutes of cooking time, package the cheese in a plastic bag, tape to the food item, and freeze together.

Mark each night's menu on the calendar so everyone knows what's for dinner. Take food items out of the freezer the night before and thaw in the refrigerator. Cook according to directions, testing with a food thermometer for a safe internal temperature before serving. Add your side dishes, like fruit, vegetables, salad, whole-grain breads, and dairy products, and you have a nutritious, inexpensive meal ready in no time!

If cooking for a month seems overwhelming or freezer space is limited, start with one week and build from there. With once a month cooking, you save time by preparing multiple dishes with nearly the same effort you would expend on a single dish. Less time in the kitchen on a daily basis means more time for family and other activities. You save money and eat better because nutritious meals are ready in a matter of minutes, eliminating trips to the drive-through. An added bonus is you always have a dish to serve to unexpected guests or to share with a sick friend or relative.

For more information on freezing foods, go to these websites: <http://food.unl.edu/web/fnh/ground-beef-recipes>

[http://nchfp.uga.edu/tips/winter/Freezing\\_Prepared\\_Foods.html](http://nchfp.uga.edu/tips/winter/Freezing_Prepared_Foods.html)

<http://www.ca.uky.edu/hes/fcs/factshts/FN-SSB.095.PDF>

<http://extension.oregonstate.edu/catalog/pdf/pnw/pnw296.pdf>

Sources: *Freezer Meals*, Utah State University Extension.

"Once a Month Cooking," *On the Home Front*, Volume 02, Number 02, Utah State University Extension Salt Lake County.

If you have a question, write to Judy Corbus, Extension Agent Family and Consumer Sciences, University of Florida/IFAS-Washington and Holmes Counties Cooperative Extension Center, 1424 Jackson Avenue, Suite A, Chipley, FL 32428; or call the Extension Office, (850) 638-6265 between 8 a.m. to noon or 1 to 4 p.m. (CST) weekdays.

The University of Florida/IFAS Extension—Washington and Holmes Counties are an Equal Employment Opportunity--Affirmative Action Employer authorized to provide research, educational information and other services only to individuals and institutions that function without regard to race, color, gender or national origin.