Menu planning…

The solution to 'what's for dinner?'

Does your busy lifestyle make it hard to serve healthy and tasty meals? Meal planning does not have to be a chore. Using a planned menu saves you both money and time, and it makes it easier to eat healthy. Set some time aside each week to plan your menu. It will soon become a habit if you start small and keep it simple with these easy steps:

1. **Follow Canada's Food Guide to help family members meet their nutrient needs.** Learn about the four food groups and the food guide serving sizes at www.canadasfoodguide.net**.** Aim to offer the daily recommended number of servings for each of the four food groups.

2. **Consider family members' likes and dislikes,** as well as their schedules for that week. At-home days give you more time to prepare a fancier meal. Having hockey practice or piano lessons might mean you serve an easy 'soup and sandwich' dinner. Try to give each person a task such as helping with shopping, unpacking groceries, setting the table or cooking to save time.

3. **Scan the food ads for specials and sales to save money and meet your budget.** Pull out favourite recipes and check if ingredients are 'on special' at the grocery store.

4. **Check the foods you already have in your cupboard, fridge and freezer.** Note what needs to be used up so it does not go to waste. Keep the pantry well stocked with healthy basics.

5. **Start planning!** Rough out a simple menu plan: the main course for each meal over the week.
   - Aim for the meal to include each of the four food groups. Don't forget to plan for snacks. A snack should offer at least two of the four food groups.
   - Use small amounts of meat, poultry, fish and alternatives (beans, peas or lentils). Add side dishes with a focus on vegetables and fruit, and whole-grains (e.g. rice, pasta, barley) and salads. Serve milk or water with meals, rather than juices or soft drinks. Add dessert; a grain, milk or fruit serving is ideal.
   - Choose foods in a variety of colours, shapes, textures and flavours. Try different cooking methods such as grilling, stir-frying and steaming.

6. **Write a shopping list based on the menu to avoid impulse buys and cut down on trips to the grocery store.** Be open to menu changes if you find a great special. Post the final menu in a visible spot so that the person home first can begin cooking. File your menu plan to reuse, saving time and energy another week!

Menu Plan Checklist

Use the questions below to plan your menu and to check if your menu is complete:

Does your menu include…?	Yes	No
A variety of foods from each of the four food groups each day		
The recommended number of food guide servings		
The appropriate food guide serving sizes		
Three main meals and two to three snacks		
Meals with a variety of interesting colours, flavours, textures , shapes, and temperatures (e.g. cooked, raw)		
At least one dark green vegetable each day (asparagus, broccoli, spinach, bok choy, frozen green peas)		
At least one orange vegetable or fruit each day (carrots, squash, sweet potato, cantaloupe, canned peaches, mango, papaya)		
Whole grain products at least half of the time (whole grain breads, cereals and pastas, brown rice, barley, oats, quinoa, couscous)		
At least 2 cups (500 mL) of milk or fortified soy beverage		
Lower-fat milk products (skim, 1% or 2% milk, low-fat cheeses and low-fat yogurts)		
Leaner cuts of meat (trimmed of fat), poultry and/or meat alternatives like lentils, beans and tofu		
At least 2 food guide servings of fish each week, such as salmon, trout, or sardines		
Limited amounts of foods and beverages high in calories, fat, sugar or salt (sodium)		
Food choices that you and your family enjoy and that fit within your budget and lifestyle		

If you answered 'no' to any of the above questions, consider making changes to your menu plan with the help of the websites listed below.

Menu Planning Online

✓ *Visit the Dietitians of Canada website:*
http://www.dietitians.ca/public/content/eat_well_live_well/english/menuplanner/Overview.asp

- Click on *Let's Make a Meal* to have fun with tools for easy menu planning
- Click on *Recipe Analyzer* to find out the nutrients in your favourite recipes and learn tips to make them healthier (less salt, fat, sugar)

✓*Visit the EatRight Ontario website:*
http://www.eatrightontario.ca/en/MenuPlanner.aspx for healthy meal plans for the family, as well as tools to build your own menu

✓*Visit Foodland Ontario*: www.foodlandontario.ca for seasonal recipe ideas

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