

Family nutrition - are you too busy to cook?

By Sian Riley, MSc RD



Family life is busy! Parents are juggling 101 balls in the air at any one time; homework, sports, the constant washing, walking the dog, writing 'thank you' cards, cleaning, making another fancy dress outfit! All important parts of healthy family life, but with so much to do, are we just too busy to cook?

Preparing, cooking and eating together is a really important part of family nutrition. Nutritionally, home cooked meals are far superior than 'readymade' equivalents. Financially, readymade meals and 'take outs' will quickly blow any household budget. Socially, eating together provides a much needed time to catch up and communicate. In a busy family, the importance of eating together shouldn't be underestimated!

The family meal really is the centre of family life.

But how in all the chaos, can we find time to prepare and cook nutritious meals? Here are my 10 tips to help you and your family enjoy that precious time together, eat healthier and even reduce your food bill in the process.

10 tips for good nutrition for the busy family

- 1. Keep it simple** – home cooking doesn't have to be of gourmet standard. Start simple and just have a go.
- 2. Plan, plan, plan** – take 5 minutes once a week to plan the meals for the week ahead. Look in your freezer, cupboards and fridge to decide what needs buying, defrosting or using up. Write a menu plan and get the kids involved by choosing their favourite dish for one of the days.
- 3. Shop online** – many supermarkets and local farm shops will deliver straight to your door. A regular order will save important minutes.
- 4. Prep the fridge, freezer and cupboards** – chop, peel, grate as much as possible and store in air tight containers. Fill the freezer with 'ready to go' vegetables and the cupboards with tins of beans, vegetables and lentils.
- 5. Prepare the night before** – whilst you're tidying away tonight's mess, start thinking about tomorrow's meal. What needs defrosting/peeling/chopping? If you make a packed lunch for the kids, also make up a packed lunch for the rest of the family. Whether you're working from home or at the office, it'll be one less meal to prepare.

6. Get the whole family helping

– good nutrition is a family affair. Give the kids age appropriate jobs to do and teach them how to cook and meal plan from an early age. In the short term it might be harder work, but you'll soon reap the benefit when they're cooking you a 3 course meal from scratch!

7. Batch cook

– if you're spending time cooking, then make it worth it! Cook double, triple, or quadruple the amount and freeze. Once cooked the meal can be frozen, later defrosted (in the fridge overnight) and reheated. The result – a 'readymade' home-cooked meal with minimal effort. My particular favourite batch cooking recipes for freezing include; Lasagne, Fish Pie, Shepherd's Pie and Sausage Casserole

8. The slow cooker

– my busy family's best friend. Prepare in the morning, switch on and let it do the cooking for you. Don't have time in the morning? Prepare the night before and store in the fridge. Follow the manufacturer's instructions and good kitchen safety advice for safe family nutrition. Some of my favourite slow cooker meals are; Stews, Sausage Casserole, and Curries.

9. Try to eat together as often as possible.

Having multiple 'sittings' results in extra work. Have the one sitting and enjoy the quality time together.



10. Plan treats and meals out

– eating out (if budget allows) is an important part of the culinary experience. Children love eating out and trying new foods and you'll appreciate the break from the kitchen. Try to vary the restaurant/cafe, to vary the experience and the nutrition.

And finally – have a few quick, easy and healthy 'fast food' options on standby for when the plan fails or for when you forget to turn the slow cooker on. I speak from experience!

Here are a few of my favourites:-

- Scrambled eggs on toast
- Soup and bread
- Omelette and salad
- Houmous, veggie and pitta bread dips
- Beans on toast
- Tinned sardines/mackerel on toast
- Pitta pizza / french bread pizza
- Tomato & vegetable pasta

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