

Menu Planning For Busy Moms



Using the *Secrets of a Busy Cook*

By Mary Ann Kelley

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How Menu Planning Saves Time & Money

If you could ask for more of any one resource in your daily life, what would it be? Odds are good that you would say either more time or more money. While we realize that food costs are skyrocketing and it is wreaking havoc with our budgets, we may not realize that something as simple as menu planning could save us hundreds of dollars each month and cut out hours of prep time each week.

Did you know that according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average American family spends more than \$2000 a year eating out? Not only does this hurt our bank accounts, it often hurts our bodies, too. From larger portions and more fat to calorie-dense foods and less vegetables, eating out falls far below home cooking in terms of health. We save time by eating out or buying processed food that takes little preparation but can be heavy on cost and light on nutrition.

On the other hand, we try to save money by eating at home and cooking from scratch and we end up spending too much precious time in the kitchen every night. This leaves us frustrated when it takes 15-20 minutes to eat what it has taken so long to prepare. There is an alternative! Menu planning can give you more time and money. Try taking this short quiz to find out if menu planning can help you:

Could Menu Planning Save You Time and Money?

- How many days per week do you eat out for dinner?
- How many days per week do you start planning dinner after 4pm?
- How many days per week have you done no physical preparation work on dinner before 4pm?

Score: give yourself one point for each day and total your score.

If you scored:

Over 15 – You sound like a mom in chaos and menu planning could dramatically help you

Between 10-15 – You are making progress but could use some tips

Between 5-10 – You are almost there, you just need a few “emergency meal ideas”

Under 5 – You are a domestic queen!

Depending on your answers to the quiz, you could gain 12-20 hours or over \$150 (or both) every month with menu planning!

Let me take a moment to say that despite my emphasis on eating out, I am not suggesting that you never eat out. On the contrary, I love to take a break from cooking and eat out. What I am suggesting is that if we could just cut out the times that we run through the drive-thru or eat out because we failed to plan dinner, we could save a significant amount of money. Let your eating out be enjoyable because it is intentional. Don't let yourself get caught in the guilt of eating out because once again it's 5pm and everyone is hungry and nothing is thawed or the pantry is empty.

If you cut out one fast food meal per week for the whole family, you can save about \$100/month depending on the size of your family. If you cut out two sit-down restaurant meals a month, you can save \$80/month. That is a total of \$180/month and it doesn't even include the amount you will save by planning easy meals around sale items instead of picking up prepared foods at the grocery store.

On the flip side, moms on a tight budget have no choice but to save money, so their strategy of cooking meals at home can leave them spending hours in the kitchen.

Someone who is preparing 6 home cooked dinners per week (not from packaged prepared foods) is probably spending at least 9 hours a week just preparing dinner. I am going to show you how smart menu planning can cut that preparation time in half, giving back 4-1/2 hours each week to use for something more important than meal preparation.



Open-faced Apple Sunflower Cheese Sandwiches

How to Make a Great Menu Plan by Customizing

Great menu plans aren't made by just listing a few meals and putting the ingredients on a shopping list. The best plans are made by taking other factors into account, and the most important factor to consider is your schedule. I use a menu planning form like the one to the right to help me keep track of what I have planned for dinner compared to what I have on my schedule. You can download our free menu planner form here:

<http://menus4moms.com/planner-pages/>

Sit down with your calendar and look at which nights you have some extra prep time and which nights you will be gone right up until dinnertime. Plan crockpot meals for nights when everyone will be walking in the door starving. Plan bulk cooking some ground beef for the freezer if you have extra time on taco night. I will discuss more about cooking for the freezer later, but for now, realize that whether your menu plan helps you depends on whether you can implement it. If you plan a big meal with lots of last minute preparations on a night that you will be gone until 5pm, odds are good that your menu plan isn't going to succeed that week.

Another important factor for customizing your menu is your grocery sales flyers. You may prefer to stock your freezer with meat when it is on sale so that you don't have to plan your meals around sales, or you might have a small freezer and prefer to plan to eat what is on sale and not store it. If you have room (and keep in mind that cooked meat takes up a lot less space than raw meat), take advantage of those sales by buying in bulk (5-10 lbs. in the case of meat) whatever is at a deep discount and preparing it the day you bring it home. Plan tacos the night you shop and when you brown the beef for the tacos, brown the rest of the ground beef (or boil it in a crockpot) and freeze the cooked beef in 1-pound increments.



Grilled Cilantro Lime Corn

If you want to take advantage of fresh produce instead of frozen, consider what is in season. It may seem obvious, but don't plan to use blueberries in August and fresh corn in March. It saves money to focus your side dishes on what's in season. The food will be cheaper and more nutritious because it is fresh. In the off-season or if you can't get local produce, it is better to use frozen fruits and vegetables because they are typically flash frozen shortly after harvest, locking in the nutrients, while fresh produce is shipped for days or weeks at a time, losing nutrients rapidly.

Cooking for the Freezer

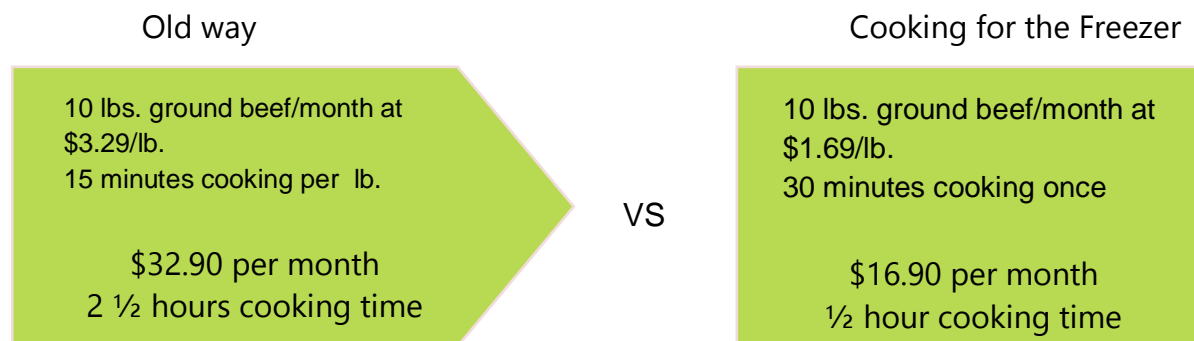


The concepts in the Busy Cook's Pyramid are ideas that I had embraced for years without actually putting them into an organized format. One day I was browsing online and found these same ideas well-framed in this concise pyramid from Lynn Nelson, and I am grateful to her for graciously allowing me to use it.

The Busy Cook's Pyramid contains 5 pyramid building blocks that, when combined, create great meals with little stress and time. The base of the pyramid is formed with the strong foundation of **Cooking for the Freezer**, which will have the most impact on saving time and money. If you have tried bulk cooking and are shuddering in horror, fear not. Cooking for the freezer can be as simple as

doubling recipes and freezing the extra or cooking ground beef and chicken in bulk so that it is ready when you need it.

One of the most important features of Menus4Moms' weekly menu is bulk cooking ingredients for the freezer, and it is how you will save most of your time and money. When you buy meat in bulk, you can stock up when it is on sale. Watch the fliers in the paper or online and have specific price points that you want to hit. When you find a sale that meets those price points, buy in bulk and prep the food for the freezer first – browning, boiling, grilling, sautéing, whatever you prefer. Why brown 1 pound of ground beef 5 times if you can brown 5 pounds 1 time?



To give you an idea of how **Cooking for the Freezer** saves you time and money, think about buying 10 pounds of ground beef at \$1.69/pound when it is on sale instead of spending \$3.29/pound. You save \$16 by purchasing it on sale, and by cooking it all at once in 25 minutes or less, you save two hours compared to cooking 10 pounds separately for 15 minutes each time.

You can see that a regular practice of this kind of freezer cooking will quickly add up in time and money savings. This doesn't include the savings not going to Taco Bell because pulling cooked meat out of the freezer and serving tacos at home costs a fraction of the money (and probably about the same amount of time) it would have taken to feed the whole family at the Taco Bell drive thru!



I often buy a 10-pound bag of frozen chicken breasts from Costco and marinate and grill the entire bag at once. When it is cooked, we have grilled chicken for dinner and chop the other 9 pounds for the freezer. Onions and green peppers can be chopped and sautéed before freezing, saving time and tears later. We do this in late summer almost weekly when our green bell peppers are ready for harvest and then we have enough in the freezer for the whole year, but even if you don't have a garden you can buy them for less

when they are in season.

If you have a rice cooker, try cooking a large batch of brown rice and freezing it in 2 cup portions. It makes a great addition to soups and casseroles without having to wait for an hour for it to cook. Beans are another time-consuming but easy ingredient to cook for the freezer. Cooking beans once and freezing them in 2-cup portions saves hours of time later when you need them for recipes, and dry beans are a fraction off the cost of canned beans.

To cook beans for the freezer:

Dried beans are easy to cook and can be done in a slow cooker.

- 1 bag dried beans (black, pinto, kidney, etc.)
- water



Rinse beans in a colander and check to be sure there are no stones or other debris. Place beans in a Dutch oven and cover with water so that the water is twice as deep as the beans. Overnight soak: Leave beans in water overnight. Quick soak: Heat to boiling and boil for 2 minutes. Turn heat off and cover, let sit for 1 hour.

Drain beans in colander and rinse pot. Place beans in slow cooker and cover with water, making sure the water is twice as deep as the beans. Cook on Hi for 5 hours or Low for 8-10 hours. Drain beans, reserving liquid (place colander on a lg. pan or bowl then pour beans in). Separate beans into 2 cup servings in freezer bags. Cover beans in each bag with some of reserved liquid.

When you are planning meals, take into account dishes that freeze well and double them as you make dinner, freezing the extra. Many pasta dishes freeze well (it is best to slightly undercook pasta and rice when it will be frozen in a dish), but it is best to avoid freezing anything with real cream since it tends to separate after thawing. The more you prepare in bulk for the freezer, the less time it takes to prepare a meal another night.

Planned Leftovers

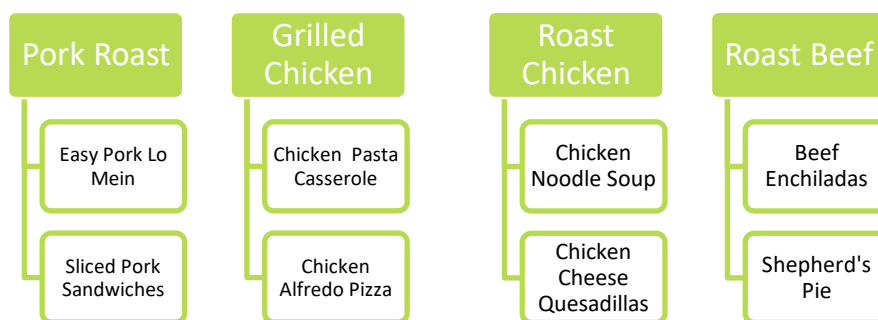
Planned Leftovers are essential for saving money because not knowing what you are going to do with leftovers from a roast or a ham usually leads to waste. The Busy Mom Menu incorporates planned leftovers almost every week and is one of the most popular features of the menus. A baked ham will later get used in Hawaiian pizza or ham and pineapple shish kabobs.

A roasted chicken is used later in the week by making broth from the bones and skin and making chicken and dumplings or chicken noodle soup. Not only is it less waste, but when you plan your leftovers, there are less meals to plan for the week.

Planned leftovers are great for scheduling conflicts, too. Usually the initial meal involves a roast or other meat, so if you use a crockpot recipe you can account for those days when sporting events or piano lessons keep you out until dinnertime. Also, you can do some of the prep work for the second meal before you put the leftovers away, saving time later in the week.



Here are some good ideas for planned leftovers:



Quick and Easy Recipes and Fast Ingredients

The third building block in our pyramid is **Quick and Easy Recipes**. Although I do occasionally make elaborate meals, most of the recipes that I use have as few ingredients as possible and simple preparation. The bulk of every busy cook's collection of recipes should be dishes that are quick and easy and can be prepared without much effort. These recipes should do more than just provide food quickly; they take advantage of fast ingredients and tools and techniques that help you keep your time in the kitchen to a minimum. Keeping a list of the easiest dishes that are family favorites and always having the ingredients on hand for these dishes is an effective way to prevent eating out when you are running late or have an especially busy afternoon.



Having a collection of quick and easy recipes isn't enough, however. Keeping your recipes organized is vital to menu planning because a messy overstuffed recipe box will discourage you when you are browsing for quick and easy recipes.

Because I have recipes from a variety of sources including magazines, recipe cards, and online printouts, I have a hard time making a recipe box work. Instead, I use a 3-ring binder, and have pocket dividers with tabs. I keep a section for each recipe category (Casseroles, Soups, Chicken, Beef, Pork, Vegetables, Pasta, etc.) and keep page protectors in each section. I really like this method because dishes that I haven't tried can go in the pocket for that section, and tried and true recipes go in the page protectors. When you have time, go through your recipe book and separate out your recipes into tried and true vs. those that you want to try. It makes it much easier to plan when every recipe that looks good isn't vying for space in your recipe box, and you know which recipes are reliable.

When planning your menus, be on the lookout for recipes with few ingredients and short simple instructions. When the kids are gone and you have 5 hours to make dinner, feel free to get out that Julia Child cookbook, but for busy moms, the best plan of action is to keep the recipes simple.

Cooking for the freezer and planned leftovers give you a head start on the 4th building block of the pyramid, **Fast Ingredients**. Fast ingredients allow you to quickly put together a main dish using frozen meat that you can thaw in the microwave. There are pantry (and freezer) staples that are perfect for busy cooks and should always be stocked for quick and easy meals. Make sure that your pantry, refrigerator, and freezer are stocked with these items at all times. For me, they include broth, rice, pasta, frozen cooked meat, frozen vegetables, cheese, and cream of chicken or mushroom soup (or a substitute mix). With items like these on hand I can put together a pot of soup or a casserole that will go from preparation to table in 20-30 minutes.

I am a big fan of frozen vegetables. Because they are flash frozen shortly after harvest, they retain most of their nutrients and are easy to steam. Steaming frozen vegetables keeps their beautiful color, and then they can be sautéed with a small amount of butter or oil and some seasonings. The whole process takes less than 10 minutes. By starting with cooked meat from the freezer and making a side dish from frozen vegetables along with a bag salad, I can put together a nice meal in about 30 minutes.

You can see that **Quick and Easy Recipes** and **Fast Ingredients** can make the difference between chaos and peace at dinnertime. Next is the last aspect of the Busy Cook's Pyramid, **Tools and Techniques**.

Tools & Techniques and a Sample Menu

Tools

The last block in the Busy Cook's Pyramid is Tools and Techniques. My mantra for cooks is to get the best tools you can afford. If you are only going to buy a crockpot once, if you can afford it, get the nicer programmable model rather than the cheapest stripped down model. In the long run you notice the difference in convenience every time you use it, and the savings in convenience is worth way more than the price difference. Good tools save you time and frustration every time you use them.

Your tools should be easily accessible. For me, that means on the counter for the big tools like my crockpot and my knives. It looks a little more cluttered than if everything was put away, but the reality is that I won't use them if I have to get them out each time I want to use them. Some of the tools that are essential for me are my grill, crockpot, microwave, good pans, good knives, and large stainless steel bowls. There are many other tools that are nice to have but not essential. Some larger ones are a bread maker, a rice cooker, and the powerful all-in-one mixers. Smaller tools that make life easier are items like the Tupperware marinade container, Pampered Chef food chopper, a garlic press, and other specialty tools. Whatever the tools are that you prefer, invest in them if you will use them. Don't fill your kitchen with a bunch of unused accessories, but for the tools you will use regularly, invest the money to purchase quality products.

Kitchen appliances and cooking techniques have come a long way since our mothers' days. All these hi-tech gadgets and cooking methods can save you lots time in the kitchen. Without planning the use of these tools and techniques into your day, they will sit unused on the counter. Most of us do not have household servants in the traditional sense, but have you ever thought of your crockpot or electric pressure cooker as a servant? Your bread machine? Take advantage of these appliances and let them serve you throughout the day so that you can focus on other things.

Here are some of my "servants":

Microwave - my favorite tool for defrosting all those prepared ingredients and meals from the freezer

Crockpot - used weekly and almost always on days when activities keep us on the go until dinnertime

Bread Machine - I prefer to make large batches of bread by hand, but this can come in handy for those who prefer one loaf at a time, and it is great for getting pizza dough ready just in time for lunch

Recipe Software - there are many available for purchase or free to download online (just do a web search for "recipe software")

Shopping List Software - I love this because once I have prices at my local stores programmed into it I can drag and drop my list from a selection of items and it will not only print it by category (saving me time running back to an aisle where I forgot something) but it gives me a total price for the trip right on the list (available free from <http://www.homeplansoftware.com/shoplist.htm>). Other useful tools are Ziplist (<http://www.ziplist.com/>) and Evernote (keep your grocery list in Evernote as a checkbox list and it will be accessible on all of your devices: <http://evernote.com/>). There are many other for shopping list apps for computers and mobile devices that make keeping a shopping list a breeze – different apps will work for different individuals, so try a few and see what features are important to you.

Grill - good tool for quick meals but also for preparing ingredients for the freezer like grilled chicken or vegetables; it keeps the kitchen cool in the summertime

Electric Pressure Cooker – recipes for electric pressure cookers abound online and can help you cut your cooking time dramatically and reduce cleanup time as well

Techniques

The last item in the pyramid is **Techniques**. Learn quick and easy ways to accomplish routine tasks. Know how to cut an onion, seed a pepper, mince garlic, or anything else most recipes call for. If you don't have a good basics cookbook, get one. Leanne Ely has written *Saving Dinner Basics*, which is full of tips to help you cook even if you don't know how. I personally love the *Better Homes and Gardens Cookbook*. It is a classic illustrated cookbook that covers all of the basics



plus things you might not be as familiar with. Now that the Internet has changed the way we obtain information, you can go online for just about any technique you want to see illustrated. I did a web search for “braising meat video” and immediately found an instructional video from the executive chef at the Wegmans showing how to braise meat from start to finish. For videos of dozens of different cooking techniques from the Wegmans site, go to this address: <https://www.wegmans.com/cookingtechniques>

You can see how using the Busy Cooks' Pyramid can save both time and money. The last key to making a great menu plan is having a back-up plan. One mom was just starting to use the menu plans, and the very first week, one of her kids unknowingly let the roast for the next day fall out of the refrigerator and it sat on the kitchen floor all night. Those kinds of things happen despite the best planning, and that is when your back-up plan comes into play. We were able to help her save the day by rearranging her meal plan to include some back-up meals.

Crisis Meals

I have several meals that I can put together in 10-15 minutes with items I keep on hand all the time and I use those as my crisis meals. These crisis meals use either frozen or canned ingredients along with pasta or rice so I don't have to worry about perishables that I don't have on hand. (I don't consider frozen vegetables perishable unless we have a power outage.) A good example of a crisis meal that everyone in my house loves is Hash Brown Soup. With just a

bag of frozen hash browns, a pound of Velveeta cheese, some chicken broth and a couple of cans of cream soup, I can put together a hearty, filling meal that can be served with bread and a salad. Even men who think that soup doesn't make a meal love this one.

Hash Brown Soup

- 1 sautéed onion ([from freezer stock](#))
- 3 cans chicken broth
- 1 large bag frozen hash browns
- 1 can cream of celery soup
- 1 can cream of chicken Soup
- 12 oz can of evaporated Milk (or 1-1/2 cups regular milk)
- 1 pound velveeta cheese
- Bacon bits for garnish if desired



Combine onion and broth, bring to boil. Add hash browns, bring to boil. Add soups (don't dilute) and evaporated milk, bring to boil. Add Cheese. Heat until cheese melts. Optional, serve with bacon bits on top.

Rachel Ray suggests keeping a few index cards in your glove-box with the ingredients listed for easy dishes. In a pinch you can stop at the store and grab the items you need to make a quick meal. If you don't work outside the home, you could create index cards with the menu on one side and the ingredients on the other, you can laminate them and let your husband keep them in his car. When you call him in a panic to pick something up at the store, he can be the hero when he brings home all the makings for a nice easy meal. Examples of quick fix meals include rotisserie chicken with a salad, fruit, and bread; ready-made pesto with pasta, salad, and bread; pizza on a ready-made crust with your favorite toppings; tacos with corn and rice; subs with veggies and dip; and cheeseburger pie with frozen vegetables.

If there's one thing I learned . . . it's to save time by doing as much work as possible before you actually NEED the food! ~ Rochelle

The menu plan on the following page was created with the Busy Cook's Pyramid in mind.

Sample menu with Busy Cook's Pyramid

M	Lasagna Steamed Broccoli Italian Bread	➔	Lasagna uses an easy recipe and makes an extra pan for the freezer . Broccoli will make leftovers for Thursday's potato bar.
Tu	Grilled Chicken Zucchini Herb Casserole Crusty Bread Pineapple Chunks	➔	Grilled chicken is cooking in bulk for the freezer and makes leftovers for Friday's Chicken Salad Pitas.
W	Tex Mex Pasta Skillet Salad Mango Slices	➔	Tex Mex Pasta is an easy stovetop recipe with fast ingredients.
Th	Loaded Potato Bar Salad Vanilla Yogurt with Apples and Grapes	➔	The Potato Bar takes advantage of leftover broccoli and you can use your tools by using the microwave or crockpot.
F	Chicken Salad Pitas Chips Frozen Grapes	➔	The Pitas are a quick and easy recipe using leftover chicken . The sides are also quick and easy.

To review, there are several things to keep in mind when putting together a meal plan. You don't have to do it all yourself; the Busy Mom Menu is a wonderful tool using the Busy Cook's Pyramid that can save you time and money.

If you decide to create your own menu plan every week, do more than just write a meal plan for the week – consider your schedule and take sales into account. Use the Busy Cooks' Pyramid to save time and money, and have a backup plan for those days when everything falls apart.

Do you love the idea of menu planning but don't want to plan your own menus? Use Menus4Moms menu plans, and save both money and time. Using our menu packs can save

you over \$100/month in grocery costs as well as hours in the kitchen! Here is what one mom says about our menus:

I have thoroughly enjoyed your site since I found it! I don't like trying new things, or doing hard recipes that leave me stuck in the kitchen all night. I have 5 children and I work and go to college part time, so my time is very limited. Your site has really helped me know what is for dinner, stick to my budget, and try out new recipes. That Chicken Pepper Pasta was so delicious last night! And more importantly, my children loved it too! Thank you for everything!

Yolanda C. in Illinois

I hope you have enjoyed our Meal Planning for Busy Moms e-Course. Menus4Moms has been planning menus for thousands of moms for over 5 years. If you love the Busy Cook's Pyramid but just don't have the time to plan it all out, The Busy Mom Menu can take the stress out of your dinner hour. The Busy Mom Menu is a 52 week menu pack with weekly dinner menus based on the Busy Cook's Pyramid that make the most of your time and money. Less than \$1.20 a week could save you over \$100/month in grocery costs as well as hours in the kitchen! Just print, shop, and cook.



Having your menu and shopping list has saved me so much time and money, has my family eating things we'd never tried before, and keeps us talking at the table rather than rushing through a restaurant. You've taken all the stress out of the kitchen for me, and put the fun back in!

Michelle W.

Get a 52 week menu pack now:

<http://www.menus4moms.com/amember/signup/index/c/busymommenu>