

Cooking for One or Two

FACT SHEET

2025 Annual Lesson Series



Cooking for one or two people is more than preparing meals; it is an opportunity to focus on your health, make time for yourself, or to create an opportunity to have a meaningful conversation with someone else. Use your time in the kitchen to get creative, learn new ways to cook, and identify foods and flavors that you love. Learning to reduce recipes, repurpose key ingredients, and freeze future meals can help transform your current challenges in the kitchen into an activity that you enjoy!

Why is preparing meals at home important?

It can be tempting to skip meals, snack on convenience foods, or go out to eat regularly rather than cook for one or two people. However, preparing meals at home can not only help save money, but it can also improve your health. Planning, preparing, and consuming balanced meals at home can help maintain weight, control chronic illness, and meet daily nutritional needs.

How do I get started?

Start with the basics! Preparing meals at home does not need to be stressful. Think of the foods in the various food groups that you love and the recipes that

you already enjoy preparing. Start small with your goals and make gradual changes to avoid feeling overwhelmed. Plan ahead and look for basic, low-stress recipes. When looking for new recipes, look for recipes that either prepare the number of servings that you can consume within 3 to 4 days or for recipes that may freeze well. Also look for recipes using the ingredients you already have on hand or that can allow you to use leftovers such as ground beef, cooked pasta, or chicken. Once you get started, don't forget to take time to enjoy the meals you prepare!

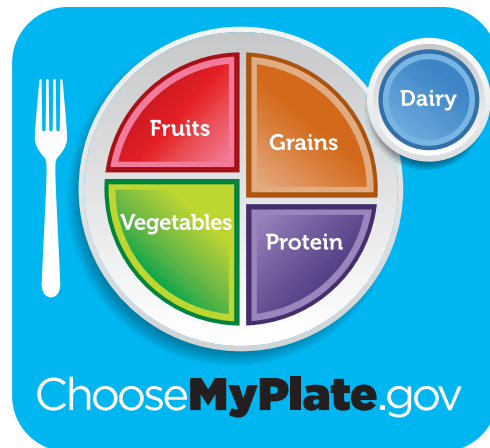
A great place to start is with MyPlate. Before you plan a meal, picture your plate. Following MyPlate and incorporating a variety of colors of fruits and vegetables into your diet can help provide the nutrients your body needs to stay healthy. You can learn more about MyPlate at [MyPlate.gov](https://www.MyPlate.gov).

Basic steps to improve the nutritional value of your meals include:

Make half your grains whole grains

- Oatmeal is a whole grain that can easily be enhanced with a sprinkle of cinnamon, chopped pecans, and diced bananas.

- Choose a whole grain tortilla to make a wrap, quesadilla, or pizza.
- Cook whole grain rice for stir-fry and use the leftovers in a soup.
- Prepare extra servings when cooking whole grain pasta to make pasta salad or a casserole.
- Look for labels on canned vegetables that say, “no added sodium.”



Vary your protein routine

- Boil several eggs at once and use them to top a salad or to add to a snack.
- Use leftover chicken to add protein to a salad.
- Add beans or lentils to a soup or stew to boost the protein.
- Use peanut or nut butter as a dip for apples or celery.

Choose low-fat dairy options

- Prepare oatmeal and canned soups with low-fat milk.
- Make a smoothie with low-fat yogurt and frozen fruit.
- Add a cup of low-fat milk to your breakfast.

Focus on whole fruits and vary your veggies

- Purchase fresh produce in quantities that you can consume while fresh.
- If fruit won't be consumed while fresh, freeze it to be used for smoothies or baked goods.
- Add cut up fresh or canned fruit on cereals, yogurt, or salads.
- Add leftover fresh or canned vegetables into soups.
- Prepare a potato in the microwave and top with broccoli, leftover chicken, and shredded cheese.
- Purchase frozen or canned produce for a longer shelf life.
 - Cook frozen vegetables in individual servings on the stovetop or microwave.
 - Buy canned fruit, canned in water or its own juice.

How do I reduce the amount of time spent in the kitchen?

Sometimes the biggest challenge in cooking for one or two is the amount of time prepping, cooking, and cleaning up from meals. In order to enjoy healthy, homecooked meals without the burden, consider planning meals that use the same ingredients. This will allow you to cook once and then use the item in multiple recipes within the next 3 to 4 days. Not only will this reduce preparation and cooking time, but it can reduce food waste. Once properly cooked, separate food that has been prepared for future meals and refrigerate or freeze. Here are some suggestions:

- When boiling eggs for a salad, prepare extra that can be used for egg salad or deviled eggs.
- When cooking ground beef for chili, cook additional meat that can be seasoned and used for tacos, spaghetti, soup, quesadillas, or baked potatoes.
- When cutting onions and peppers for fajitas, slice and/or chop extra to be used on salads, soups, and tacos.
- When preparing a dish with onions or peppers, use it as an opportunity to prepare for future meals. Onions and peppers do not have to be blanched before being frozen. Wash your peppers or onions in water, cut or chop as intended for future recipes, and add them to a labeled, freezer storage bag.

How long can I keep leftovers?

According to the USDA, food can be safely kept in the refrigerator for 3 to 4 days. Leftovers should be refrigerated or frozen within 2 hours. If the air temperature is above 90°F, such as at an outdoor picnic, food should be refrigerated within 1 hour.

Leftovers stored in the freezer will be of the best quality if used within 3 to 4 months. Included below are some quick tips for becoming friends with your freezer:

- Keep track of what you have in the freezer on a piece of paper taped to the outside of your freezer to remind yourself to consume those items within 3 to 4 months.
- Consider freezing leftovers in portion sizes appropriate for future meals. Freezing leftovers in smaller portion sizes can reduce thawing time and food waste.
- Choose containers or bags that are freezer safe to ensure that the flavor, color, and nutrient value of your food is maintained. Before freezing, ensure as much air has been removed from the freezer-bag or container as possible to reduce air exposure to the food.
- Note that some foods do not freeze well. According to the National Center for Home Food Preservation, examples include cabbage, celery, lettuce, Irish potatoes, cooked spaghetti or rice, milk sauces, sour cream, and fried foods. Furthermore, the USDA reports that you cannot freeze canned food or eggs in shells.

Food must be kept at a safe temperature while thawing. As soon as food begins to thaw and becomes warmer than 40°F, bacteria can begin to multiply quickly and lead to foodborne illness. Thawing frozen foods can safely be done in three ways: in a refrigerator, in cold water, or in a microwave. Foods thawed by the cold-water method or in the microwave should be cooked immediately after thawing. Never thaw food on the kitchen counter, in hot water, or outdoors. These methods leave food unsafe to eat. Planning meals can provide enough time to safely thaw foods for meals. Leftovers should be reheated until an internal temperature of 165°F is measured, using a food thermometer.

How do I avoid food waste?

According to the USDA, the average household can save \$370 per person per year by reducing their food waste. Some tips to reduce your food waste include:

- Shop your pantry or refrigerator first.
- Make a shopping list and stick to it. (If you need a template for a shopping list that follows MyPlate, you can find one online at myplate.gov/eat-healthy/healthy-eating-budget/make-plan.)
- Eat before you go grocery shopping. Not feeling hungry can reduce the pesky impulse spending that can lead to overspending and the temptation to purchase foods that may not align with your meal plan. It may also help prevent you from purchasing more food than you are able to eat before it goes bad.
- Store your food properly to reduce spoilage. (One tip is to place an appliance thermometer in both your refrigerator and in your freezer. Keep your refrigerator at 40°F or below and your freezer at 0°F or below.)

However, remember the key rule: When in doubt, throw it out! If you aren't sure if an item is safe to eat, it is best to discard it. See the publication Working Together to Reduce Food Waste for more tips to reduce food waste: <https://ksre-learn.com/mf3482>.

How do I reduce a recipe?

Sometimes the quantities produced when preparing a recipe are excessive for your needs. If you are unable to consume the food within 3 to 4 days or freeze it for later, reducing a recipe may be a good option to avoid food waste. When recipes are altered, it is important to remember that the changes can impact cooking time and the overall recipe results.

The ease of altering a recipe can vary based upon the number of ingredients, the quantity of each ingredient, and the type of recipe being prepared. Start with a recipe with a limited amount of ingredients to build confidence in altering recipes. Some recipes can be altered more successfully than others. Always practice altering a recipe before preparing the recipe for a guest or special occasion.

- **Baked goods often require precise measurements of ingredients**, making the recipes difficult to successfully reduce. Consider making the original recipe and freezing it into individual portions for future use.
- **Convert the recipe before starting to cook.** This will help identify the ingredient quantities needed, the required cooking tools, and help reduce confusion while cooking.
- **Cookware.** Smaller cookware may be needed when reducing a recipe for a casserole or quiche. A dish that is too small may prolong cooking time and one too large may cause overcooking.
- **Cooking time.** Recipes that have been reduced can have shorter cooking times. Perform periodic

checks on your item, using a food thermometer. Write down the final cooking duration on your modified recipe for future reference.

- **Halving an egg.** A standard large egg is approximately $\frac{1}{4}$ cup. If a modified recipe calls for $\frac{1}{2}$ of an egg, whisk the egg and then measure out 2 tablespoons of the whisked egg mixture.

Here's an opportunity to practice reducing a recipe. Most recipes prepare 6 to 8 servings. Using the chart on page 5, reduce the ingredients in a recipe from 8 servings to 4 servings. In this situation, the quantity of each ingredient will be divided by 2 to reduce servings from 8 to 4. Use the K-State Research and Extension Cooking Basics: Reducing a Recipe Fact Sheet for additional guidance, <https://ksre-learn.com/mf3531>.



Activity: Reducing a Recipe

INGREDIENT	8 SERVINGS	4 SERVINGS
Rice (cooked)	2 cups	
Onion (small, chopped)	1	
Kidney beans	2 cups (1 15-ounce can, drained)	
Flour tortillas (10 inch)	8	
Salsa	½ cup	
Cheese (shredded)	½ cup	

Bean and Rice Burritos

Ingredients:

- 2 cups rice (cooked)
- 1 onion (small, chopped)
- 2 cups kidney beans
(one 15-ounce can, drained, low-sodium)
- 8 flour tortillas (10-inch)
- ½ cup salsa
- ½ cup cheese (shredded)

Directions:

- Wash hands with soap and water.
- Preheat the oven to 300°F.
- Scrub onion with a clean vegetable brush under running water.
- Peel the onion and chop it into small pieces.
- Drain the liquid from the cooked (or canned) kidney beans.
- Mix the rice, chopped onion, and beans in a bowl.
- Put each tortilla on a flat surface.
- Put ½ cup of the rice and bean mix in the middle of each tortilla.
- Fold the sides of the tortilla to hold the rice and beans.
- Put each filled tortilla (burrito) in the baking pan.

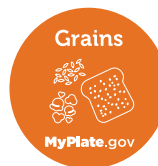
- Bake for 15 minutes. (If quantities are reduced, the recipe may not require the full 15 minutes. Cook until a food thermometer reads 165°F.)
- While the burritos are baking, grate _____ cup cheese.
- Pour the salsa over the baked burritos. Add cheese.
- Serve the burritos warm.
- Refrigerate leftovers within two hours.

Source: Bean and Rice Burritos – USDA MyPlate - <https://www.myplate.gov/recipes/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap/bean-and-rice-burritos>

Nutrition:

Serving size: 1 burrito; 341 calories, 8 g total fat (3 g saturated fat), 7 mg cholesterol, 607 mg sodium, 55 g carbohydrates, 5 g dietary fiber, 3 g total sugars, 0 g added sugar, 11 g protein, 162 mg calcium, 3 mg iron, 285 mg potassium

MyPlate food groups: ½ cup vegetables, 3 ounces grains, 1 ounce protein foods, ¼ cup dairy



Anytime Pizza

Hungry for pizza, but don't want all the leftovers? Try this Anytime Pizza recipe to prepare individual servings.

Ingredients:

- ¼ mini baguette or Italian bread, about 9" long (split lengthwise or 2 English muffins)
- ½ cup pizza sauce
- ½ cup mozzarella cheese or cheddar cheese (part-skim, shredded)
- ¼ cup green pepper (chopped)
- ¼ cup mushrooms (fresh or canned, sliced)
- Other vegetable toppings (as desired, optional)
- Italian Seasoning (optional)

Directions:

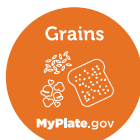
- Wash hands with soap and water.
- Toast the bread or English muffin until slightly brown.
- Gently rub produce under cold running water. Chop or slice produce.
- Top bread or muffin with pizza sauce, vegetables, and low-fat cheese.
- Sprinkle with Italian seasonings as desired.
- Return bread to toaster oven or regular oven preheated to 350°F.
- Heat until cheese melts.
- Refrigerate leftovers within 2 hours.

Source: Anytime Pizza – USDA MyPlate - <https://www.myplate.gov/recipes/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap/anytime-pizza>

Nutrition:

Serving size: 1 slice or 1 English muffin; 180 calories, 7 g total fat (3 g saturated fat), 15 mg cholesterol, 502 mg sodium, 18 g carbohydrates, 2 g dietary fiber, 4 g total sugars, 1 g added sugar, 11 g protein, 250 mg calcium, 1 mg iron, 335 mg potassium

MyPlate food groups: ½ cup vegetables, ½ ounce grains, ¾ cup dairy



Baked Meatballs

Interested in eating homemade meals, without the regular mess? Try this Baked Meatball recipe to cook once and freeze meatballs for future meals.

Ingredients:

- 1 pound thawed ground beef, 90% lean (or ground turkey)
- 1 egg
- ½ teaspoon dried parsley
- ½ cup breadcrumbs
- ½ cup milk, 1% (or non-fat)
- ¼ teaspoon ground black pepper
- 1 teaspoon onion powder

Directions:

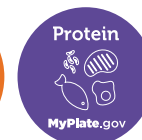
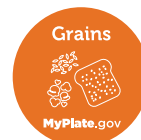
- Wash hands with soap and water.
- Mix all ingredients, shape into balls (about 24 meatballs).
- Arrange meatballs on baking sheets that have been sprayed with non-stick cooking spray.
- Wash counter, utensils, and bowl after touching raw meat to avoid cross contamination.
- Bake at 425°F for 12 to 15 minutes. It is best to use a food safety thermometer to check for doneness. It should read 160°F for ground beef and 165°F for ground turkey.
- If meatballs are being saved for future use, chill rapidly; package in amounts needed per meal and freeze immediately.

Source: Baked Meatballs – USDA MyPlate - <https://www.myplate.gov/recipes/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap/baked-meatballs>

Nutrition:

Serving size: 3 meatballs; 131 total calories, 6 g total fat (2 g saturated fat), 59 mg cholesterol, 98 mg sodium, 6 g carbohydrates, 0 g dietary fiber, 1 g total sugars, 0 added sugars, 13 g protein, 43 mg calcium, 2 mg iron, 206 mg potassium

MyPlate food groups: ½ ounce grains, 1 ½ ounces protein foods



Goal Setting

Making small changes in your shopping habits and cooking routines can save you money, improve your health, reduce food waste, and help you find more enjoyment in the kitchen. What outcomes are most important to you? What change(s) will you implement to help you reach your goal?

SMART Goal (Write a goal that is Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Timely):

Motivation (What is motivating you to make a change?):

Challenges (What is currently keeping you from being successful?):

Outcomes (What do you anticipate will happen because of your changes?):

References

- Working Together to Reduce Food Waste, <https://ksre-learn.com/mf3482>
- Cooking Basics: Reducing a Recipe, <https://ksre-learn.com/mf3531>
- MyPlate, <https://www.myplate.gov/>
- How to Cook Once and Eat Twice, <https://food.unl.edu/how-cook-once-and-eat-twice>
- Leftovers and Food Safety, <https://www.fsis.usda.gov/food-safety/safe-food-handling-and-preparation/food-safety-basics/leftovers-and-food-safety>
- General Freezing Information: Containers for Freezing, <https://nchfp.uga.edu/how/freeze/freeze-general-information/containers-for-freezing/#gsc.tab=0>
- General Freezing Information: Foods That Do Not Freeze Well, <https://nchfp.uga.edu/how/freeze/freeze-general-information/foods-that-do-not-freeze-well/#gsc.tab=0>
- Freezing and Food Safety, <https://www.fsis.usda.gov/food-safety/safe-food-handling-and-preparation/food-safety-basics/freezing-and-food-safety>
- Why should we care about food waste, <https://www.usda.gov/foodlossandwaste/why>
- Healthy & Fit on the Go, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1PPHbSDYmIne9T2NRhrfrWzb1RfA5r1WS/view>

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