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Meals with Ease

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COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE
SOUTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY
U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
Meals with Ease

Many homemakers today are confronted with the problem of preparing attractive, nutritious meals in a limited amount of time. What things make a difference in the ease of doing this?

Living Situation

The homemaker with a large family has a real problem keeping up with the preparation of sheer quantities of food to say nothing of keeping economy, quality, and variety of meals under control. If her family are all of average weight, active, and have good appetites, she can take some comfort in the fact that sheer quantity of food is apt to insure, with few exceptions, the minimums of the food nutrients.

The homemaker who is away from home all day has the additional problem of getting a meal on the table in almost "nothing flat."

The older homemaker has the opposite problem. She has to learn to prepare small enough quantities to be used before they become stale and to prepare, without waste, a large enough variety of food to appeal to less vigorous appetites. She also often has to feed, unexpectedly, 4-6 or more who are sure grandma always has something good to eat, even if she "doesn't know we are coming."

A generous amount of food money would, of course, be a big help for all of these, but wouldn't solve the whole problem. Going out to eat or purchasing complete meals is the easiest solution, but is usually expensive and one soon tires of the food. Commercially prepared food such as TV dinners, main dish foods, prepared vegetables, meats, salads, and desserts cost less and may help ease some of the pressure. Some of these foods judiciously chosen and combined with raw or home prepared foods may result in an economical meal that is appetizing and takes a minimum of time to assemble.

On the whole, foods prepared at home either from scratch or from partially prepared foods are the most economical. Such partially prepared foods as frozen and canned vegetables, fruits, and juices may actually be cheaper than fresh ones.

Using some partially prepared foods and planning and preparing (or partially preparing) meals ahead is probably the best over-all plan for saving time, effort, and money.

Attitude and Stamina

A positive attitude toward preparing meals in a limited amount of time is a great asset. Planning ahead is the best meal easer and a mind alert to the situation makes for efficiency and ease of planning.

The best start for a truly overworked homemaker is to get the cooperation of the family. Very simple meals can be adequate and should be served until "Mom's" load is eased.

Skills and Education

There are all kinds of helps in books and magazines as well as in materials from your county extension office. Homemakers' clubs have demonstrations and neighbors usually like to share methods. Seek out those who know how; most people enjoy showing a neighbor how. Skill comes with practice. Try one thing at a time. Take advantage of convenience foods to ease the situation until skill is acquired.

Family

Adapt family meal patterns, with common sense, to prevailing schedules. Don't try to stick to a rigid or traditional pattern if it no longer suits the situation. Even a little flexibility in a schedule can relieve tenseness and make a more pleasant meal time.

The right family food habits and attitudes can be a big help. See if wrong attitudes can be improved.

Restrictive diets and family diets can be coordinated. By using a little common sense, the same basic foods can be used for both.

Most family diets would be improved by a larger use of the nonstarchy vegetables necessary for a diabetic diet, and by restricting all the family somewhat on the rich, sweet desserts forbidden to diabetics. Corn, potatoes, and a few rich desserts need not be denied the family. Other restrictive diets are as easily coordinated.

Available Time

Any homemaker whose time for meal preparation is short will probably save time by taking time to take complete stock of her situation. She will surely find some spots she can improve if definite plans are made for it.

Consider:

- How much time should she use for meal preparation? Is she trying to give her family homemade foods prepared from scratch just as mother or grandmother used to? What prepared foods could she use to advantage?
- Has she interested her family in the varieties and flavors of plain, simply prepared, good food, or has she catered to whims?
- Are there members of the family who could share, to their benefit, food preparation, serving,
cleaning-up, or shopping? Is the fault hers for not interesting them and suggesting how they could help? Could she combine several small jobs for greater efficiency?

Has she broken down large jobs into small ones that can be done by youngsters or in short or odd times? Has she made these small jobs definite for younger children?

Does she waste time because of poor meal planning and poor shopping records, such as lists of inventory, brand, sizes, and cost? Because of this does she fail to secure help not knowing what assistance others can give?

Is she lacking skill? How can she improve?

Is equipment, large and small, well-planned and well-placed? Does she waste time and effort deciding which pan to use then perhaps changing her mind after putting the food in? Is there equipment she should discard, rearrange, or replace?

If time is adequate, but not just previous to meals, consider pre-preparations and convenience foods. A cooking day and preparation of double quantities—one to eat and one to store—will help.

Some homemakers do have time, but because of disinterest they don’t want to spend it on meals. Lack of strength or physical disabilities may contribute to this lack of interest. These homemakers are apt to have more help from others with shopping, etc. if they have a list and know the brands, quantity, etc., they want.

Just as food prepared by others has more interest, so food prepared previously and leisurely may be more interesting when used later. Already prepared food means that meals are easier to assemble. Easier preparation means that she is more apt to invite guests and be invited by others which stimulates interest and appetite for meals.

Money Available

Use money efficiently to buy time and ease meal problems. Some convenience foods are expensive, some are not when the effort and time of the homemaker is considered. Make comparisons as to which are satisfactory.

Cost of food doesn’t signify its value—cheaper grades of meat, canned and frozen vegetables and fruits as well as dried beans, cabbage, and potatoes have significant food value. Cheaper grades of meat take longer cooking time but not necessarily more preparation. Longer, slower cooking can be used to advantage when watching it is not required.

Fruits and vegetables at the height of the season are cheaper, tastier, and food nutrients are the highest. To save time use them raw or simply prepared.

Tradition and Background

Certain home prepared and traditional foods have psychological values beyond their cost in time, effort, and money. Value these traditions, but adapt modern methods. For example use steam pressure for baking beans; refrigerator method for rolls; batter breads; square biscuits. Bake instead of steaming puddings and brown bread.

If you prepare one of the nostalgic foods, feature it. Have the remainder of the meal well balanced but very simple. For example, feature small loaves of bread hot from the oven, served with a fruit plate and cottage cheese.

Equipment

Have the best you can afford and the simplest that will do the job. Buy elaborate equipment only if you really intend to learn how to use it.

Clear out what is not used regularly. Organize the rest. Store occasionally used items in less convenient places. Replace equipment that doesn’t function properly as soon as possible.

Types of Foods

Use raw foods such as fruits, melons and vegetables.

Good food, simply and carefully cooked, does not need elaborate preparation. Learn a few tricks to add variety and make them special. Add or top with a few nuts, parsley, sauces, paprika, or a dab of jelly or glaze. Use a garnish of bright fruit or vegetable. A plain cake made with butter and a simple butter frosting is more flavorful than an elaborate, fancy cake made with shortenings.

Take advantage of partially prepared foods such as juices, fruits and vegetables, pies, and breaded shrimp, as well as canned vegetables. Use such bakery and grocery items as bake and serve rolls; instant puddings, potatoes, and beverages; and refrigerated biscuits, rolls, and cookies.

Another type is fully prepared foods. These include complete frozen meals or single menu items such as scalloped potatoes, creamed vegetables or baked products; canned and bottled fruits, fish, meats, soups, stews, baked beans, steamed brown bread, and salad dressing; bread, rolls, pastries, and other bakery items; and delicatessen or catered foods like hot barbeque meats, cold meats, salad, hot baked beans, or cold specialty food.

Kinds and Quality of Convenience Foods

Each person will have to decide whether each of the convenience foods is actually inferior or superior, or is it so only in comparison with his home standard.

Consider these things in choosing convenience foods:
Is it good enough to be repeatedly acceptable? (Bakery bread, canned soups, bake and serve rolls)
Is it acceptable occasionally? (TV dinners)
Is the quality excellent—even better than homemade? (French bread, ice cream, cheese cake)
Can it be given the homemade touch and be very acceptable? (Pizza, pastry mixes, caramel rolls)
Is the cost just about the same as home prepared? (Some are even less expensive)
Is the cost reasonable considering the cost of the homemade product and the amount of time needed for the preparation? (This will vary with the income, time and skill of the homemaker.)
Does a recipe made from scratch contain so many different ingredients that it takes too long to assemble and make the correct amount for your family; or must items be purchased in quantities that will leave items on the shelf that won't be used? If so, the convenience product may then cost less.
Is the food difficult to prepare and does it require much time and/or skill for the homemaker? If so, the prepared product may be more economical.
Will the partially prepared product reduce cost and/or time to complete the meal preparation within reasonable limits for the homemaker?

Tricks of the Trade

Save time with your own recipes by up-dating methods and using short cuts. Watch for new products and new methods for using them (granular flour). Try baking instead of steaming.

Cake. Measure ingredients for two at the same time. Put ingredients for one in a bowl and for the second in a can with a tight fitting lid. Homogenized shortening can be dropped into the can without blending it in until you are ready to make the cake. Put a label on the can to note the liquid, egg, or other ingredients to be added.

Try batter yeast rolls or coffee cake, putting them directly into pans, let rise and bake.

Frosting. Try broiled frosting.

Frost or glaze cookies or rolls with pastry brush. Frost cupcakes or pieces of cake by dipping in frosting.

Pastry. Double or treble the dry ingredients and shortening for pastry. If you use lard, store the mix in the refrigerator. Made with shortening, it can stay on the pantry shelf. Made-up pie dough, in wax paper, will keep a week in the refrigerator; in plastic bags it molds more quickly.

Make one crust pies, or use crumb toppings for fruit pies. Use fruit crisp, bettys, or cobblers instead of pie. Crumb crusts are also quick, easy and good.

For biscuits use dough cut square to save time; use biscuit dough for pizza, cheese sticks, cinnamon rolls, meat pie, and short cake. Use drop biscuit dough for drop biscuits, dumplings, cobbler, and coffee cake.

Have shaker of cinnamon and sugar on hand.

Oven Temperature. Plan things that can bake at the same temperatures. Some things are flexible. Potatoes can be baked from 325-450° F. if time is adjusted. Plan whole meals that can go in the oven without watching; for example, stuffed baked pork chops, baked sweet potatoes, baked apples, and buttered green beans.

Plan whole meals that can be cooked in the broiler, a skillet, or a pressure pan.

Equipment. Learn to use your equipment to its fullest and to good advantage. Get out your instruction book and see what you haven't tried with a timed regulated oven or timed temperature controlled burner or sauce pan.

Learn to use a chopping or French knife. Keep all knives sharp.

Have a good peeler with a floating blade. These blades may have slots that differ in width. Get one that suits you best.

Use a cutting board that can be moved to the sink for preparing vegetables for salad and canning, to the stove for carving, and anywhere for sandwich making. Select a board that will lay across the sink and leave an open space that you can put a pan or paper under to catch vegetables or scraps. Cut or slice a quantity of vegetables or fruits at one time.

Preparation Short Cuts. In-season vegetables are worth extra effort but don't make them more trouble than necessary. Cut the stem ends off a handful of beans at one time. Don't trim the blossom curl—it's tender and good.

Since much of the mineral and vitamin content of vegetables is next to the skin, leave it on when possible. Cook new potatoes, carrots, and beets, so the skins slip off easily.

Serve strawberries with stems on. Leave all or part of apple peel on for salad and sauce.

Snip extra parsley, etc., refrigerate, freeze, or dry.

Frozen vegetables cook in less time than fresh ones, but they don't start to cook until thawed. Set them from freezer to refrigerator to partially thaw, or to room temperature for a shorter time ahead of cooking.

To peel oranges with less effort, cover with boiling water for 5 minutes. Peel and refrigerate before serving.

Save clean-up. Do all peeling over paper.
To peel eggs, dip into cold water and peel quickly before surface reheats from inside.

Dry small pieces of cheese and grate all at once to use later.

Grease molds lightly with cooking oil to make gelatin mixtures unmold easily.

Use your timer.

Try granular flour for thickening for sauces, soups, and gravy. It dissolves almost instantly without lumps. Shake regular flour with water in a tight-lid jar.

Use paper bags to flour chicken or meat. Crush dried bread or crackers with rolling pin.

Rest your spoon or spatula on a piece of foil then throw foil away.

Keep on hand soups that are useful in casseroles, in meat or fish loaves, or as sauces over vegetables (cream of tomato, mushroom, chicken, cream cheese).

Cook soups or broth the day before or several hours early. Cool (refrigerate) so fat hardens and you can take it off easily.

Frozen Foods. Freeze foods packaged according to your needs. Save trays from TV dinners and freeze a few individual meals. Don’t try to keep these very long for they can’t be sufficiently well wrapped.

Freeze ground beef and/or ground pork mixtures to use for chili, spaghetti, “sloppy joe” sandwiches, pizza topping, or baked beans.

Set table and get as many breakfast things as possible ready the night before.

Set frozen juice from freezer to refrigerator for several hours so it will mix easily. Juice loses very little of its vitamin C so it can be mixed ahead.

Lunches. If lunches have to be packed, prepare the same thing at the same time for the stay-at-home. Sandwiches made and wrapped carefully, and frozen or thoroughly chilled several hours or overnight, stay fresher and safer, especially for hot weather lunches.

Make a big batch of sandwiches at one time and freeze.

Menus. Use a “fix it yourself” buffet meal occasionally.

Use a tray on wheels to save steps and organize the meal.

Set table nicely but simply. Let children serve dessert—or help if they are young. Have family help clear table between first and second course. If the dishes are put to soak, they will be almost ready to rinse when meal is finished.

Keep paper plates and cups on hand to use when especially rushed.

Try a variety of crackers and cheese or dips, or fruit with cheese for dessert.

Write out two or three menus using foods from your emergency shelf plus anything you regularly have in your refrigerator or freezer. Keep these on or near the emergency shelf. Use foods from your emergency shelf often enough to keep them fresh.

Shopping. Keep a continuous grocery list. Any member of the family should note any supply getting low.

Jot down ideas you get on the run, or while doing other jobs.

To help shop the ads, learn grades, brands and sizes. Be specific on your market lists about these (brands often signify the grades).

Shop in the same market often enough to know it well and to be known so you can order by phone and pick up the order later, or give a list to your husband or a youngster. Know the arrangement of your market. Plan your list in order; pick up frozen foods last.