



## **Step Up to the Plate to Plan Healthy Dinners**

The lazy hazy days of summer are dwindling. A busy new school year coupled with hectic work schedules brings everyone back to business as usual. Posting menus on the refrigerator door may clear up the question the frequently asked question-- "What's for Dinner?" By planning ahead, fewer trips to the grocery may be required, healthier food items may be on hand and the temptation to "drive thru" may be less.

### **Step 1: Carve out time to create your plan.**

Check your day timer (or whatever time management system you use) then set aside 15-30 minutes of quiet time in the kitchen to take the rest of the steps. A proactive planner puts in time up front to save time later. The intention is to plan in advance then allow for dinner time to become routine.

### **Step 2: Start where you are.**

Check the freezer, refrigerator and pantry to see if any items may be incorporated into menus. Some busy women create lists of what to keep on hand in each section of the kitchen for their families. A master list will have a section for the freezer, refrigerator and pantry. The website [www.mealsmatter.org](http://www.mealsmatter.org) has a downloadable pantry form that can be adapted for any household. Here are some ideas for staples to get started:

- freezer: colorful vegetables/blends, lean beef and pork, skinless chicken, heart healthy fish and frozen berries
- refrigerator: eggs/substitute, low-fat milk, yogurt, cottage cheese and cheese, seasonal fresh fruits and vegetables
- pantry: whole grain pasta/rice, pasta sauce, salsa, canned beans/soups, spices and condiments

### **Step 3: Take a snapshot of the week ahead.**

Scheduling considerations are the most important part of this step. Check the family calendar to see how many members of the family will be home for dinner. There may be potential helpers to get a meal started by popping a dish into the oven, setting the table or cleaning up.

#### **Step 4: Choose a good fit.**

A “win-win” approach is to match your schedule with the family schedule to pull off a meal. This can be a bit tricky and often requires flexibility. Classifying recipes (with examples) in the following categories may help:

- **Casserole/Oven Night**-One Dish Chicken & Rice Bake
- **Crock Pot Night**-Easy BBQ Chicken & Chicken-at-the-Ready
- **Pasta/Pizza Night**-Simply Lasagna
- **Quick Fix Night**-Easy Baked Tilapia
- **Soup/Stew Night**-Quick and Easy Chili
- **Stir Fry/Skillet Night**-Easy Beef and Vegetable Stir-Fry
- **Breakfast for Dinner**-Hash Brown Breakfast Casserole
- **Left-over Night**

Jo Schenkel, RD, LD, with Personal NEWtrition, has provided some recipes she uses in menu planning at the [www.nutritionosos.com](http://www.nutritionosos.com) website. Suggestions of what to serve with these meals to balance out the nutrition are with each recipe. Once the menu is decided a grocery list can be developed. [www.realsimple.com](http://www.realsimple.com) has a grocery list template to work from.

#### **Step 5: Understand this is a process.**

Working through each of the steps be mindful of what is working. Then choices may be made to adapt and adjust meal plans to meet family needs. Store menus on the computer or in a 3-ring binder. The most valuable recipes are healthy ones that are well liked. It is typical for a family to have 10-12 well worn recipes. [www.oxmoorhouse.com](http://www.oxmoorhouse.com) has a “5 Ingredient/15 Minute Cookbook” by Cooking Light with some tasty recipes. It is \$34.95 and may also be available at the public library.

Zonya Foco, RD and Personal Trainer at [www.zonya.com](http://www.zonya.com) developed a counter top coaching system called “*Lickety Split Meals for Health Conscious People on the Go!*” It is a system with 3 books in one, a cookbook, complete grocery guide and motivating health and fitness advice. This book has healthy “home cooking made easy” recipes with the emphasis on “the power of one good habit”. Zonya Foco, RD is committed to the concept that small, simple steps make a difference and are the key to long-term lifestyle change. Order it on-line for \$20 plus shipping and handling.

Invite the family “back to the table” and “step up to the plate” with well planned dinners to share whenever possible. Take **one step at a time** to learn to have a healthier relationship with food and each other. Balance these steps and clip on a pedometer, tracking is available at [www.americaonthemove.org](http://www.americaonthemove.org) for Step-tember.