



The Importance of Meal Prep

Every time I mention “meal prep” to people they look at me like I have five heads. Meal prep, what does that mean? If you are in the fitness industry, you know exactly what that means – its preparing food/meals in advance for the week.

Gut reaction from clients: I don't have time to do that! I have 3.5 kids, 2 dogs, a husband, work, laundry, recitals, ball gamesI don't have time to meal prep too!

But you eat, right? You still have to make breakfast/lunch/dinner, right? So here's some info on WHY you should do a “meal prep” session, and some tips on making it simple(er).

So what is meal prep?

Most of the clients I work with both in personal training and on The Challenge have one major goal in mind – lose weight. There are various reasons and motivating factors as to why, which vary from person to person. And many of them, as well as many of you reading this, struggle with what to eat. For those of you on The Challenge, 2-3 meals a day are covered with either your favorite Vi-Shake (www.recipes.vi.com) or Vi-Crunch cereal (www.crunch.vi.com), but what the heck else are you supposed to eat?

Do you often stand in front of the refrigerator gazing into what seems like the abyss and say “What's for dinner? Ugh, I need something healthy... I have a goal... it can't be high in calories... but I don't feel like cooking... but I need something... I'll just order Chinese food”. Sound familiar?

Well, this is where meal prep comes into play. No it doesn't have to be a daunting task; no you don't have to eat salads every meal. If you do meal prep in the beginning of the week, your lunches and dinners can be taken care of in about 20-30 minutes – for the week!

So meal prep is simply cooking a few meals all at once, storing them in Tupperware or other containers for easy re-heat or eating for the week. Like I said, it does NOT have to take a long time and it can be fun! What do most people, especially busy moms, need? **Healthy, fast, food!** What's faster and healthier, (and cost effective) than good food you cook yourself?!

Here are a few tips and key things to keep in mind when doing meal prep:

1) **What to include in a lunch or dinner prepared meal:**

You want protein, carbs and good fat at each meal:

*Protein - 4-6 oz. (for example: chicken, fish, turkey, lean red meat)

*Veggies – Have 1-2 cups of green leafy veggies; can't go too overboard on this!

*Starchy vegetable (for example: sweet potato) or some kind of grain, like a brown rice or quinoa (less than half cup)

*Optional/maybes: avocado or almonds (if no other fats used in the cooking of the protein or veggies)



2) When to do meal prep:

Set aside approximately 1-1.5 hours to do your meal prep in the beginning of the week. I do mine on Sunday or Monday afternoons. Sundays may work for you if you have someone who can watch the kids while you cook and clean up or maybe later after they go to bed. **I KNOW, I KNOW, you're tired.** But if you take the 1.5 hours once a week, you will **save** time and money in the long run by preparing your meals in advance. It's a proven concept AND it takes the guess work out of what you can have that's "healthy".

3) How to cook Foods for Meal Prep (Source: <http://www.leanitup.com/meal-planning-flash-quickly-effectively-prepare-healthy-fat-burning-muscle-building-meals/>):

*To keep it simple, Bake, broil or grill proteins instead of frying/sautéing.

*Bake sweet potatoes instead of frying or roasting them in tons of oil.

*Steam (or grill) vegetables to maintain their nutrient content as opposed to boiling.

*Use dried or fresh herbs and spices to lower fat and salt content of dishes.

*Sauté vegetables lightly in coconut oil instead of frying to blast fat and up your metabolism.

*When all else fails, eat your veggies raw!

*Braise tough cuts of meat in broth for a few hours for tender protein. Use a crockpot or slow cooker to facilitate this process.

*Use low sodium broth when cooking rice, pasta, quinoa or other grains for added flavor.

*Steam squash and pull it apart gently with a fork to replace traditional pasta for a gluten-free or paleo alternative.

*Marinate meats (and even veggies) before grilling for extra flavor.

*Mix fresh herbs like parsley, cilantro, garlic, and even grated carrots and zucchini into ground meat dishes for succulent and moist proteins.

*Get in the habit of including spinach, arugula, kale, or any other green as a base.

4) **Not sure what items you'll need for preparing and storing your food? Before you start any meal prep session consider these essentials** (Source: <http://www.leanitup.com/meal-planning-flash-quickly-effectively-prep-healthy-fat-burning-muscle-building-meals/>):

***LOTS of plastic containers** — Plastic containers (e.g. Tupperware) are probably the easiest way to store and transport your meals. With plastic containers you can easily take food from fridge to microwave to meal time in a few minutes. The convenience of plastic containers is honestly why meal prepping for the week has become such a practical strategy for eating right and staying on track.

***Cooler** — Some health and fitness enthusiasts advocate keeping your meals in a cooler so that they stay fresh until you're ready to eat. This is obviously an optional piece of equipment. If you work at an office chances are you have access to a fridge where you can store your food, but if you're on the road a lot, a cooler might be a great option for you. Know your lifestyle and what works for you.

***Crock pot or Slow cooker** — If you work long hours or have a busy schedule, a crock pot is definitely a must-have for your kitchen. In the mornings before work you can easily put chicken, beef, or your favorite protein in the pot with a low-calorie liquid (think low sodium chicken broth) for an awesome braise that will be ready by the time you come home. Search the internet and you'll find thousands of recipes for really innovative meals that are clean and lean.

***Rice Cooker** — Who wants to stand in front of a pot of water as you wait for it to boil? Rice cookers are another fairly inexpensive tool to cook rice that requires minimal effort to operate. Like the crock pot you can easily put brown rice or quinoa in a rice cooker with water, salt, and other spices/herbs. When you come home from work, simply turn your rice cooker on and within 30-60 minutes you should have fluffy and perfectly cooked rice. Bonus points if you cook your protein in the crock pot and your starch in the rice cooker!

***Oven safe pans and dishes** — When I first started doing meal prep, I ate A LOT of baked chicken breast. For me and many "clean eaters", boneless skinless chicken breasts are a dietary staple. Baking is one of the easiest (and tastiest) ways to enjoy it. Remember that oven-safe pans are also great for foods other than chicken. You can bake other proteins, veggies, or even whole-grain casseroles and fibrous starches.

For those of you who still seem somewhat overwhelmed about planning meals for the week, ease your mind with these no-nonsense tips and tricks:

***Start small** — You don't need to plan every single meal for every single day of the entire week. If cooking and storing that much food seems crazy start on a smaller scale. Start with lunches for the work week; that's only five meals compared to the twenty-one plus you could be preparing. You can handle five right?

***Plan ahead** — Know what you're going to eat and make before you even start cooking. There's (almost) nothing worse than when you are in the middle of a meal prep session only to find that you're missing an important ingredient. Bottom line, figure out what you're going to eat that week and what basic meals you're going to rotate around. Write down the ingredients and the amounts if you need to before going grocery shopping.

***Cook in bulk** — If you're making chicken for four lunches and three dinners that week, cook them in the same pan. You can easily season them after they're cooked for two totally different flavor profiles. The same goes for starches. If you know that you're going to be consuming eight meals that each include ½ a cup of rice, cook all four cups at once. Make a HUGE batch of [chili](#) or stew in the crock pot for the entire week. You'll save time, energy, and money!

***Get creative** — Sick of chicken and broccoli every night? Try substituting beef! Instead of always eating pork and quinoa, try adding cilantro, bean sprouts, and snow peas for an Asian inspired stir fry. With all the different proteins, carbs and veggies you're preparing, there are a ton of different combinations you can make to keep you from getting bored (and maintain a variety of nutrients in your diet). Challenge yourself to see how many different meals you can make with only a handful of ingredients.



Don't let the idea of time and a messy kitchen overwhelm you. It takes some time to get into a routine, but once you start staying on track with your goals is much easier!