
Cooking tips for busy people

Summary

- Keep a stock of long-life ingredients (such as frozen, canned or dried products) that can be combined in any number of ways to create interesting dishes.
 - If you live alone and don't like to cook for just one, try inviting people over for dinner more often.
 - Cook in bulk, and freeze meal-size portions for later in the week or month.
-

Australians spend about one third of their household budget on convenience foods such as takeaway and supermarket ready-to-eat meals. There are many reasons why people are cooking less often. People's lives are busier; the two-income household can mean that neither partner has the time or energy to cook every night. There are also more people living alone, who often don't want to cook for themselves.

However, convenience foods can be expensive and some are notoriously high in fat and salt. Fast foods are up to 65 per cent higher in **kilojoules** and larger in portion size than food prepared at home. The average fast food meal contains about half the kilojoules needed for the day, so many people are eating far too many kilojoules without realising it. If you lack the time or motivation to cook, the following suggestions may be helpful.

Keep your pantry well stocked

You may be tempted to order takeaway if your pantry is bare and you can't face the thought of going to the supermarket. The secret is to stock long-life ingredients that can be combined in any number of ways to create interesting dishes.

Suggestions include:

- Buy long-lasting vegetables like potatoes, carrots and onions, which can form the basis of soups or casseroles.
- Stock plenty of dried pasta, such as spaghetti, fettuccine, macaroni and spiral varieties.
- Keep a selection of other long-life carbohydrates like rice (stock different varieties such as white, brown, arborio and jasmine), Asian-type dry noodles, lentils and couscous.
- Use tinned tomatoes, tomato paste, tinned corn and other vegetables (look for 'no added salt' varieties) for pasta sauces, soups or casseroles.
- Stock a range of canned fish – for variety, include tuna, salmon and sardines.
- Keep tins of legumes on hand (for example, kidney beans, three-bean mix, chick peas).
- Keep a supply of canned and packet soups (look for 'no added salt' varieties).
- Have a stock of oils and vinegars, including olive oil, sesame oil, balsamic vinegar and red wine vinegar. You can make a wide range of salad dressings or marinades with these ingredients if you include a dash of herbs and lemon juice.
- Stock dried herbs, including basil, coriander, mint, thyme, oregano and mixed herbs.
- Useful condiments include tomato sauce, mustard, mayonnaise, relish, stock cubes, ready-made stock, soy sauce and chilli sauce.
- Dried goods to stock include pine nuts, curry powder, sun-dried tomatoes and shiitake mushrooms.
- Store a variety of nuts – these are a great meat alternative, especially in pasta or rice dishes.

Make the most of your freezer and fridge

Keep your fridge and freezer stocked with handy, healthy food. For example:

- Buy frozen vegetables. Contrary to popular belief, these products retain a high proportion of their nutrients.
- Fresh crushed garlic and ginger are available in jars and fresh herbs are available in tubes to keep in the fridge.
- Citrus fruits like oranges have a long life when refrigerated.
- Fresh lemon and lime juice can be bought in bottles and stored in the fridge.
- Grated cheese can be sealed and stored in the freezer to increase its shelf life.
- When buying fresh meat, choose de-boned varieties. Divide the quantities into meal-sized portions and freeze separately.
- Buy red meat and chicken already sliced or diced or marinated.
- Buy bread in bulk and keep it in the freezer until needed.

Meal suggestions for busy people

The above pantry and fridge items can offer you a range of easily prepared main meals including:

- pasta
- casseroles
- stews
- curries
- soups
- risottos
- stir fries
- salads.

For more information on meal ideas see our [recipes section](#).

Time-saving cooking suggestions for busy people

Suggestions include:

- **make extra portions** – while you're making your pasta sauce, casserole or soup, make double (or even quadruple) the quantity you need. Freeze the remainder in meal portions, and you have ready-made meals for later in the week or month
- **double up on tasks** – you can save time if you do two things at once. For example, prepare your pasta sauce while your spaghetti is cooking
- **prepare one-pot meals** – one-pot meals such as soups, risottos, stews, curries and casseroles save on washing up
- **use a microwave** – it's easier and quicker to microwave foods than cook them in the oven or on the stovetop. Check your manufacturer's instructions on how to best cook different foods using your microwave
- **use small, thin chunks of food** – they cook faster than big chunks
- **don't throw out leftovers** – store them appropriately (such as refrigerating or freezing) for a quick meal the next day. Or reinvent the leftovers in a creative way; for example, pasta sauce can make a tasty jaffle filling.
- **cook the night before** – for example, cook in the evening (when any children have gone to bed) and, if you have a partner, ask them to help you with the preparation like chopping vegetables. This will speed up the process and make it more fun. This means time-consuming recipes like soups, curries, stews or casseroles can cook while you relax in the evening.

Find your motivation for cooking

Some people who live alone don't like to cook for themselves. Different ways to motivate yourself include:

- Invite people over for dinner more often.
- Offer to go round to a friend's house to cook for them one night (hopefully, they will then return the favour one night for you).
- If you have a child in your life (such as a grandchild, niece or nephew), involve them in cooking sessions. Most

children enjoy preparing and cooking food, and you can have a lot of fun together making pasta sauce or soup in bulk.

- If your problem is coming up with interesting meals, a good cookbook can inspire you, or browse the Better Health Channel for easy, quick-to-prepare recipe ideas. Some food packets also have easy recipes on them.
- Think of the money you'll be saving by cooking, instead of eating convenience foods (and how much better it is for you). Use the saved money to buy yourself a treat.

Where to get help

- **Dietitians Association of Australia**
- **Nutrition Australia**
- **Live Lighter**
- **Heart Foundation – Healthy eating**

This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by:

Content on this website is provided for information purposes only. Information about a therapy, service, product or treatment does not in any way endorse or support such therapy, service, product or treatment and is not intended to replace advice from your doctor or other registered health professional. The information and materials contained on this website are not intended to constitute a comprehensive guide concerning all aspects of the therapy, product or treatment described on the website. All users are urged to always seek advice from a registered health care professional for diagnosis and answers to their medical questions and to ascertain whether the particular therapy, service, product or treatment described on the website is suitable in their circumstances. The State of Victoria and the Department of Health & Human Services shall not bear any liability for reliance by any user on the materials contained on this website.

For the latest updates and more information, visit www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

Copyright © 1999/2019 State of Victoria. Reproduced from the Better Health Channel (www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au) at no cost with permission of the Victorian Minister for Health. Unauthorised reproduction and other uses comprised in the copyright are prohibited without permission.