

# Cooking at Home

## Improving Your Health with Home-Cooked Meals



One of the simplest ways to improve your mental and physical health is to prepare more meals at home. While we all love the convenience of restaurant and takeout food, when you cook at home you have much greater control over what you're eating. Even preparing just a few meals at home each week can increase your energy, boost your mood, stabilize your weight, and reduce your risk of serious illness. Cooking at home is also a great way to spend time with others—and you don't have to be an accomplished cook to make simple, healthy meals.

### **The benefits of cooking at home**

Whether you live on your own or are a busy parent, finding the time and energy to prepare home-cooked meals can seem like a daunting task. At the end of a hectic day, eating out or ordering in might feel like the quickest, easiest option. But convenience food can take a significant toll on your mood and health.

Processed food is typically high in chemical additives, hormones, sugar, salt, unhealthy fat, and calories, all of which can adversely affect your brain and outlook. It can leave you feeling tired, bloated, and irritable, and exacerbate symptoms of depression, stress, anxiety, and other mental health concerns. It can also affect your waistline. A recent study showed that people who eat out consume an average of 200 more calories a day than those who prepare meals at home.

By cooking for yourself, you can ensure that you and your family eat fresh, wholesome meals. This can help you to look and feel healthier, boost your energy, stabilize your weight and mood, and improve your sleep and resilience to stress. When you prepare your own food, you're also more aware of exactly what you're putting in your body, and how different foods affect the way you think and feel.

Cooking at home doesn't have to be complicated. [The cornerstone of a healthy diet](#) is to eat food that is as close as possible to the way nature made it. That means replacing processed food with real food whenever possible and eating plenty of vegetables and healthy sources of protein. It doesn't mean you have to spend hours in the kitchen combining hundreds of different ingredients or slavishly following elaborate recipes. In fact, simple meals are often the tastiest. And you don't have to be perfect and make *every* meal at home, either. Cooking at home just a few times a week can reap rewards. Whatever your abilities or experience as a cook, you can learn to prepare quick and healthy meals that can have real benefits for your mental and physical health.

## Benefits of cooking at home

### Health benefits

Preparing healthy meals at home can support your immune system and reduce the risk of illnesses such as heart disease, cancer, high blood pressure, and diabetes.

It can give you more energy, improve how you sleep at night, and help you better manage health problems.

In women, cooking healthy food can help reduce symptoms of PMS and menopause, and boost fertility.

If you're on a special diet or trying to lose weight, preparing meals for yourself gives you more control over ingredients and portion sizes, enabling you to better control your weight or cope with food allergies.

By practicing safe food handling while you cook at home, you're less likely to contract a foodborne illness.

Cooking at home can sharpen your mind, fight cognitive decline, and decrease your risk of Alzheimer's.

It can stabilize kids' energy and help them grow into healthy, confident adults.

### Emotional and social benefits

The simple process of cooking at home can be empowering and improve your mood and self-esteem.

Taking time out from a busy schedule to cook can also be a great stress reliever.

Preparing even simple meals at home can be creatively fulfilling.

Adopting a diet of healthy, home-cooked meals can increase your resilience to stress, anxiety, and depression and boost your mood and outlook.

Cooking and eating with family is a great way to bond with your loved ones.

Inviting friends to join you can expand your social circle, which can alleviate stress.

Eating wholesome meals can even add joy to your life. When your body feels healthier, you feel happier—inside and out.

Studies have also shown that when you regularly prepare home-cooked meals, you're also more likely to make healthier choices on those occasions when you do eat out. In other

words, eating healthy food can become a habit.

### The pleasures of sharing a home-cooked meal

Food brings people together and cooking at home is a great way to unite your family over the dining table. Everyone loves a home-cooked meal—even moody teenagers or picky eaters. And if you live alone, that doesn't mean you have to cook or eat alone. Sharing meals with others is a great way to expand your social network. Getting appreciative feedback on a meal you've prepared for someone can bring a real boost to your self-esteem, too.

**Make mealtimes a social experience.** The simple act of talking to a friend or loved over the dinner table can play a big role in relieving stress and boosting mood. Gather the family together and stay up to date with each other's daily lives. If you live alone, invite a friend, coworker, or neighbor over.

**Switch off screens.** Take a break from the TV, turn off your phone, and avoid other distractions so you have a real chance to connect with the person you're sharing a meal with. By avoiding screens and eating with others, you'll also help to avoid mindless overeating.

**Cook with others.** Invite your spouse, roommate, or a friend to share shopping and cooking responsibilities—one prepares the entrée, the other dessert, for example. Cooking with others can be a fun way to deepen relationships and splitting the costs can make it cheaper for both of you.

### Overcoming obstacles to cooking at home

Despite all the benefits, many of us still think of preparing meals as a chore, either something that we don't have time for, or something that's only suitable for experienced cooks. Maybe you've tried cooking before and didn't like the end results, or maybe your kids just prefer takeout food?

Overcoming obstacles to cooking at home often starts with changing the way you view meal preparation or time spent in the kitchen. Some common reasons why we don't cook at home, and what to do about them, include:

#### **Obstacle 1: "I don't have the time to cook."**

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Sure, shopping, chopping ingredients, cooking, and then cleaning up afterwards can be time-consuming. But there are plenty of ways to speed things up:

- Shop online and have all the ingredients delivered to your door.

- Get friends and family involved. Trade off shopping and cleanup duties with your spouse or a neighbor.
- Instead of watching cooking shows on the couch, move the TV into the kitchen and follow along.
- Multitask: chat on the phone or watch TV while you cook.
- Buy pre-washed bags of chopped vegetables and throw everything into a crock pot or steamer for a healthy meal in no time.
- Try a cook-at-home delivery service where the ingredients and recipes arrive on your doorstep.
- Do some of the preparation ahead of time. Chop vegetables over the weekend when you're less pressed, for example, to cut down on your final cooking time.
- Use fresh ingredients. Salads and raw food recipes can take just minutes to prepare.
- View cooking meals as a pleasant, relaxing experience rather than a chore—it won't seem nearly as time-consuming.

### **2: “It’s cheaper to eat fast food.”**

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At first glance, it may seem that eating at a fast food restaurant is less expensive than making a home-cooked meal. But that’s rarely the case. A study from the University of Washington School of Public Health revealed that people who cook at home tend to have healthier overall diets *without* higher food expenses. Another study found that frequent home cooks spent about \$60 per month less on food than those who ate out more often.

### **3: “I’m too tired to cook at the end of a busy day.”**

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Creating healthy meals doesn’t have to involve a huge investment of effort.

- Loading a slow cooker with meat and vegetables in the morning allows you come home to a piping hot meal at night, with minimal preparation and little cleanup.
- Make meals in bulk and freeze leftovers in single portions to eat when you don’t have the time or energy to cook.
- By cooking your main protein once a week, such as a roast chicken or slow cooked turkey breasts, you can use the meat to create quick and easy meals during the week, such as soup, salads, sandwiches, burritos, or pasta dishes.

### **4: “I don’t know how to cook”**

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If you’re intimidated by the prospect of preparing a home-cooked meal, it’s important to remember that cooking is not an exact science.

- It’s usually perfectly OK to skip an ingredient or substitute one thing for another.
- Look online or buy a basic cookbook for simple recipe ideas.

- As with anything, the more you cook, the better you'll become. Even if you're a complete novice in the kitchen, you'll soon master some quick, healthy meals.

### 5: *"I hate being in the kitchen."*

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If you hate the idea of spending time in the kitchen, you need to embrace your fun side. Cooking isn't work, it's recreation!

- Play your favorite music, pour yourself a glass of wine, and dance around as you chop and peel.
- Or listen to an audiobook and lose yourself in a good story.

### 6: *"Even if I cook a healthy meal at home, I can't get my family to eat it."*

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Over time, you can wean your family (and yourself) off the taste of takeout and packaged food.

- Start small, cooking just once or twice a week to give everyone's taste buds chance to adjust.
- Young children love to cook and find it fun to eat what they've helped to make.
- The childhood impulse to imitate is strong, so the more your kids see you eating healthy food, the more likely they are to follow suit.

## Tips for getting started

**Start with fresh, healthy ingredients.** Baking sugary treats such as brownies, cakes, and cookies won't help your health or your waistline. Similarly, adding too much sugar or salt can transform a healthy home-cooked meal into an unhealthy one. To ensure your meals are good for you as well as being tasty, start with healthy ingredients and flavor with spices rather than sugar or salt.

**Keep it simple.** Steam or sauté some veggies, grill some fish or chicken, add some herbs, spices, or a healthy sauce. Simple cooking can be tasty and quick.

**Cook enough for leftovers.** It's great to have leftovers that can be used for a quick and easy lunch or dinner the next day. When making things like rice or pasta, cook at least double the amount you need and store it in the fridge to use with other meals. Freezing leftovers can also ensure you have a home-cooked meal on hand whenever you don't feel like cooking.

**Make substitutions for healthier meals.** Grill or bake instead of fry. Replace salt with

garlic or onion powder. Cut the sugar called for in most recipes by 1/3 to 1/2. Decrease the meat and increase the vegetables in stews and casseroles. Choose whole-grain versions of pasta and bread, and substitute whole-wheat flour for bleached white flour when you bake.

**Stock up on staples.** Ingredients such as rice, pasta, olive oil, spices, flour, and stock cubes are staples you'll likely use regularly. Keeping cans of tuna, beans, tomatoes and bags of frozen veggies on hand can be helpful in rustling up quick meals when you're pushed for time.

**Give yourself some leeway.** It's okay to burn the rice or over-cook the veggies. After a few tries it will get easier, quicker, and tastier!

### **The benefits of a slow cooker**

Whether you have a full kitchen or live in a dorm room or bachelor apartment, investing in an inexpensive slow cooker or crock-pot can help you create easy, healthy meals.

- A slow cooker is a plug-in device that slowly cooks food unattended—and is easy to use for even the most inexperienced cook.
- You can add ingredients in the morning before work and then come home at the end of the day to a fully cooked meal.
- Slow cookers are ideal for cooking one pot meals like soup, stew, chili, and curry.
- When slow cooked, even cheaper cuts of meat can taste delicious.
- A slow cooker uses less energy than a conventional oven, and can keep your home cooler in the summer.

### **Cooking for one**

Today, more and more of us live alone, either through choice or circumstances. But the great thing about cooking for one is that you don't have to please anyone but yourself. Cook using the ingredients you enjoy, even if they're not to other people's liking, or have breakfast for dinner if that's what you feel like.

### **Cooking for one doesn't mean cooking or eating alone**

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Cooking at home doesn't have to mean spending more time alone. You can make your own healthy meals and still find that social connection we all crave.

- Cook a little extra and invite a coworker or neighbor to join you. Or take turns preparing meals for each other.
- Make your food at home, then eat out at park, picnic area, museum, food court, or

coffee shop. Having enough food to share with others can be a great way to break the ice and make new friends.

- Shop for food at a farmer's market instead of a grocery store. People here are more likely to take time to discuss the food and give cooking tips, making it easier to strike up new friendships.
- If you don't have people in your life that you want to eat with, find ways to [meet new people](#). Take a cooking class, join a club, or enroll in a special interest group that meets on a regular basis. [Volunteering](#) is another great way to find future dining companions.

## Cooking without a real kitchen

Whether or not you have a full kitchen, a slow cooker and appliances like a steamer and toaster oven can be quicker and easier to use, especially if you're a novice cook.

**Toaster oven.** Because it heats quickly, a toaster oven is an economical way to broil, bake, roast vegetables, or make toasted sandwiches.

**Hot plate.** Ideal for hotel rooms, dorm rooms, and small apartments. Just about anything that can be made on a stove top can be made on a hot plate with a saucepan or frying pan.

**Rice cooker.** With a little creativity, it can also be used to cook flavorful one-pot dishes as well as rice.

**Steamer.** Steaming is the one of the quickest and healthiest ways to prepare food. You can use a standalone electronic steamer or a steamer basket that fits into a saucepan.

## Steamed vegetables don't have to be boring

Steamed vegetables such as broccoli, Brussels sprouts, green beans, carrots, and asparagus can be tasty as well as quick and nutritious.

- **Steam** thinly sliced veggies. For a flavor boost, add stock to the water.
- **Top** with olive oil, herbs, or with a quick and healthy sauce.
- **Add** fish, thin strips of chicken, or tofu for a complete meal.

## Recommended reading

[Home cooking: Good for your health](#) - How cooking meals at home can be an effective medical intervention for improving diet quality, weight loss, and diabetes prevention. (Harvard Health Blog)

# HelpGuide

[Healthy Cooking for 1 or 2](#) - Tips on making healthy meals, whether you're dining alone or with a companion. (Mayo Clinic)

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