

Daily Union Article  
Saturday, December 10, 2016  
Title: Dining In Helpful Hints

Last week, I shared that December 3 was “Dining In” day. Making the choice to prepare your meals for dining in has many benefits:

- You can help ensure that dine in meals are healthier and more flavorful than dine out ones because YOU control the ingredients and preparation methods used.
- You can better control the amounts of food served, or the portion sizes.
- It promotes family time together. Your children or grandchildren will learn how to prepare and serve meals – skills that are quickly fading from our younger generations!
- Typically dining at home is cheaper than eating out.

Knowing the benefits is a good start to changing toward dining in more. However, there is planning, food preparation skills, and time required to make this switch more common in your home. Learning how to plan menus can save time and money. You can base your grocery list on the planned menus and avoid impulse purchases that are costly to your food budget. Once you establish a system for planning, the process will move quickly. This article provides some basic meal planning steps to help you get off to a good start.

**Create Your Food Budget:** It is easy to overspend on your food purchases if you don’t plan ahead for this expense. If you set yourself to a weekly limit, you can use the ads from area grocery stores to help you determine what will work for your family’s preferences while sticking to a budget.

**Consider Family Favorites:** Work with your family members to come up with a list of what they like to eat. Specifically, take a week or two to collect information from your kids on what combinations are their favorites. They are more apt to help you in the kitchen in preparing foods they like. You will save time and food waste if you prepare things that you already know how to make and your family will eat.

**Make the Best Better:** Even our favorite meals can bare improvement when it comes to healthier choices or to add balance to your menu. Consider what you can add to your familiar meals to add nutrition to the meals your family already likes. The main dish, which is the base around which the rest of the menu is planned, should provide a serving of protein. Choose side dishes that round out a balanced meal – vegetables, fruits, and whole grains. Serve milk and another hot or cold beverage to complete the meal. Avoid sugary beverages such as pop or fruit-flavored drinks.

**Start Small:** At first, pick one meal each day to plan for. It is best to use the main meal of the day for your family. If you aren’t currently planning meals ahead of time, starting small will help you gain the skills and confidence you will need to expand your

efforts in the future. After you have become comfortable with the planning process, add another meal.

**Plan a Week at a Time:** Plan meals for one week at a time. This will make the process more manageable. Save your menus to reuse in the future. If you develop eight of the week-long menus, you will repeat menus every third month and reduce the risk of getting “bored” with your menu items. For more variety, create 10 standard week-long menus.

**Make a Shopping List:** It is always a smart idea to walk into the grocery store with a list. When you create a week of menus it becomes so much easier to make your grocery list reflect what you really need for your meals. Plan to shop only once a week to ensure you stick with your budget AND with your planned menus. In addition to your weekly shopping list, keep a “running list” of your staples and indicate those things that you run out of, but may not need for the next week’s menus. For example, I use cornmeal on my pizza pan to keep my homemade pizza dough from sticking. I only use a tablespoon at a time, so I put it on my “running list” when I am getting low and add it to my next weekly grocery list.

**Use Plan-Overs:** I commonly prepare several pounds of meat or poultry at a time to ensure I have left-overs to use as plan-overs. Sunday’s turkey dinner can become Tuesday’s stir-fry or Wednesday’s soup. By incorporating plan-overs into your menu plan you can save money and reduce food waste.

**Be Realistic:** Look at your family’s schedule to see what you can realistically prepare each day. Plan the nights you will need to eat out and include that as part of your food budget.

**Be Flexible:** When you plan for a week and purchase your groceries around that plan, it becomes much easier to be flexible with your meal preparation because you have what you need on hand. If you forget to set out the frozen hamburger to make meatballs, simply change to another menu from the same week using ingredients that are already purchased for another night’s meal.

There are many online tools available to assist you with weekly or bi-weekly menu planning. The Iowa State Extension and Outreach has a menu planning form and healthy recipes you can incorporate into your weekly meal choices. Their website, <https://spendsmart.extension.iastate.edu/plan/menu-planning/>, also has a short video overview of how to be successful at menu planning and other helpful planning tools.

Menu planning is a fun and cost-saving way to increase you “dine in” nights with the family. For more tips on menu planning, contact me at the Geary County K-State Research and Extension office at 785-238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!