

By Milton Stokes, RD

cooking quick, healthy meals at home

Fast food can be good for your health.

Does your car practically steer itself to the nearest fast-food joint when you're driving home from work? Are you on a first-name basis with the counter staff at your local hamburger haven? If so, take comfort in the fact that you're not alone in the fast-food lane. These days, we're all short on time and suckers for a quick meal—your clients included.

Try as you might, it's hard to quit eating out at fast-food restaurants. There is a lot to be said for avoiding crowded supermarket lines and not having to clean up the kitchen when you are exhausted from the rigors of your day. But take heart: You don't have to sacrifice healthy food for convenience. It is possible—and easy—to prepare quick, nutritious meals at home in the blink of a tired eye!

Cook Up a Plan

Like everything else in life, fast meals at home take some advance thought. "Many people don't cook because of lack of planning," says Heather Reseck, RD, author of the *Fix-It-Fast Vegetarian Cookbook* (see "Resources.") "A willingness to climb out of food ruts provides a start, but planning ahead makes all the difference."

If you are someone who has trouble boiling water, you need to take fast-food preparation *slowly!* Experts warn against getting too ambitious and advise novices to aim instead for cooking just 1 or 2 nights a week.

Once you have decided which nights you plan to cook at home, record those dates using your personal organization system, be it a yellow sticky note on your kitchen calendar or a reminder in your PDA (personal digital assistant). This step is important because most people don't commit to doing something that is not on their

weekly to-do list, especially if they are tired and hungry. It's far easier to follow the road to the nearest drive-in window!

Involve the Whole Family

It also helps to make your cooking plans known to others in your household, such as your partner, roommates or children. Not only does this help you stick to your commitment; it also gets others involved in the food selection process and maybe even the actual cooking and cleanup.

In the book *The Moms' Guide to Meal Makeovers*, authors Janice Newell Bissex, MS, RD, and Liz Weiss, MS, RD, urge parents to involve their kids in meal planning whenever possible. As working moms themselves, Bissex and Weiss warn that this team effort may result in a bigger mess come cleanup time, but they stress that the experience can bring a family closer and also foster healthy eating choices. That's because the dietary habits parents teach youngsters in childhood are known to engender a lifetime of healthy lifestyle choices.

Keep It Simple

One of the biggest barriers to preparing a healthy meal at home is the perception that the effort must be complex and exhausting. The trick is not to get overwhelmed, which can prove self-defeating. "We need to keep it simple," explains Bissex. "Busy people need easy recipes that aren't intimidating."

Nutrition experts recommend arming yourself with a few cookbooks that showcase recipes for healthy, tasty, nutrient-dense meals requiring 30 minutes or less to prepare and cook. According to Holly Clegg, author of *Meals on the Move: Rush Hour Recipes*, easy, everyday recipes that use readily available ingredients are crucial to home meal preparation. For a look at some cookbooks that feature quick, healthy meals, see "Resources."

Cook Smart

Many cookbooks designed for people on the run also contain helpful lists of ingredients so cooks have everything they need to follow through on their good intentions. "The secret is to have a well-stocked pantry so [that] when you [come] home tired,

you have the ingredients on hand to prepare a meal," says Clegg.

Another key ingredient for cooking healthy, fast food is to find smart ways to cut preparation and cooking time *without* surrendering taste or nutrition. "To cook smart," says Bissex, "look for any opportunity to boost the nutrition of your recipes." One way to do that is to make small but meaningful ingredient additions. "If you're making macaroni and cheese, transform it into a salmon noodle casserole by adding a can of salmon and some frozen peas." Don't like salmon? Try adding canned tuna to this casserole or replace the fish ingredient with any vegetable you have on hand, such as shredded carrots, halved grape tomatoes or sliced fresh mushrooms.

fiesta salsa

This salsa recipe is a favorite with kids and teens. Parents will love it because it requires no cooking time and can be whipped up quickly as a healthy after-school snack! It can also be part of a salad or a topping for a baked potato.

Preparation Time: 10 minutes

Ingredients

2 ripe avocados, peeled, pitted and chopped
 1 pint cherry tomatoes, quartered,
 or 1 pint grape tomatoes, halved
 1 cup frozen corn, thawed
 3 tablespoons (tbs) canned, chopped
 green chilies, drained (but not rinsed)
 1 bunch green onions (scallions), sliced
 3 tbs lime juice
 ½ tsp sugar
 salt and pepper to taste

Carefully toss all ingredients together. Serve as a dip with baked corn chips or as a topping for your favorite Tex-Mex dish. Makes 14 servings.

Per Serving: 67 calories; 5 g total fat; 1 g saturated fat; 7 g carbohydrate; 2 g dietary fiber; 1 g protein; 19 mg sodium.

Source: Reprinted with permission from The Holly Clegg Trim & Terrific™ Cookbook: More Than 500 Fast, Easy, and Healthy Recipes by Holly Clegg (Running Press 2002).

have-it-your-way tacos

Because it can be personalized, this recipe lets you please all of the people all of the time!

Preparation Time: 10 minutes

Cooking Time: 10 minutes

Ingredients

1 pound lean ground beef
(90% lean or higher)
12 taco shells
1 15½-ounce can black beans, drained and rinsed
1½ cups preshredded, reduced-fat cheddar cheese
1 cup corn kernels (canned or frozen, thawed), optional
1 cup salsa
2 teaspoons (tsp) ground cumin
1 tsp chili powder
½ tsp garlic powder

Pick-and-Choose Toppings (optional)

1 ripe avocado, peeled, pitted and chopped
1 tomato, chopped
½ cup reduced-fat sour cream
1 cup shredded lettuce
½ cup sliced black olives

Preheat oven to 350° Fahrenheit. Heat a large nonstick skillet over medium-high heat. Add the meat and cook, breaking up the large pieces, until no longer pink (about 5 minutes). Drain excess fat. While the meat is cooking, bake the taco shells according to package directions. When the meat is done, add the beans, cheese, corn (as desired), salsa, cumin, chili powder and garlic powder; stir to combine. Cook until the mixture is heated through and the cheese is melted (about 2 minutes). Spoon 3–4 tablespoons of the meat filling into each of the taco shells. Serve with optional toppings. Makes six servings.

Per Serving: 310 calories; 11 grams (g) total fat; 3 g saturated fat; 25 g carbohydrate; 6 g fiber; 27 g protein; 60 milligrams (mg) sodium.

Source: Reprinted with permission from The Moms' Guide to Meal Makeovers by Janice Newell Bissex and Liz Weiss (Broadway Books 2004).

Another time-saving measure is to buy precut, packaged veggies, such as bags of prewashed lettuce or carrot sticks. Even accomplished cooks can be put off at the prospect of coming home to wash, peel, slice, dice and cook fresh vegetables. Occasionally relying on frozen, canned or dried vegetables can simplify meal preparation, especially when these ingredients are added to stir-fried dishes or soups. Frozen veggies cook up in a snap or can be placed in the fridge to thaw the night before. Try tossing some frozen broccoli or spinach on that otherwise plain cheese pizza before you pop it into the oven. Canned tomatoes and beans are other good options for busy cooks; just remember to drain the salty liquid they're packed in and rinse them with fresh water before adding them to the dish you're making.

Eileen Faughey, MA, RD, author of *QuickFlip™ to Delicious Dinners*, is always seeking new ways to boost the nutritional benefit of quick meals. "I like to add sundried tomatoes to salads, sautéed vegetable dishes and ethnic dishes," she says.

Faughey recommends that clients stock up on food staples designed to save time in the kitchen. "Pick up preformed whole-wheat pizza dough to make your own pizza at home," she says. She also advises clients to keep on hand healthy ingredients like whole-grain couscous, which can be added to canned soups. "Adding a couple of tablespoons of flax meal, wheat germ or some finely chopped nuts to baked goods will pump up the nutrition," states Bissex.

A final way to save time in the kitchen is to double your recipes when cooking and then refrigerate or freeze unused portions for dinner later in the week. "Cook once but eat twice," suggests Faughey. "If you cook extra amounts of a vegetarian Mexican recipe on Sunday, you can add sliced chicken or fish the next day to make burritos." Another tip is to divide leftovers into single-serving containers that can be frozen and reheated individually when needed.

Ladies & Gentlemen, Start Your Ovens

Whether you're a novice cook or a seasoned pro, time can be a huge barrier to cooking nutritious meals at home. The bottom line is to use your time wisely.

"Health and nutrition need to be incorporated into our lives in enjoyable

ways, instead of being an extra project," says Faughey. "If we look at our priorities, we may view a home-cooked meal as being a good use of time."

With careful planning, the right tools and some creativity, healthy fast food can be your recipe for your family's good health!

Milton Stokes, RD, is a clinical nutrition manager and freelance writer in New York City. He's contributed nutrition-related articles to Newsweek, Family Doctor, Today's Dietitian, Men's Health, American Health and Fitness, WeightWatchers.com and Slim-Fast.com. Contact him at miltonstokes@msn.com.

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Resources

Books

- American Institute of Cancer Research (AICR). *Homemade for Health*. (To order, contact the AICR at 800-843-8114 or www.aicr.org.)
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www.foodfit.com
www.foodnetwork.com
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www.wholefoods.com