

5 Pain-Free Meal Planning Tips

I admit it... I love food.



I love eating food, I love thinking about food, I love talking about food and I love making delicious things to eat. I think I can fairly say that everyone loves eating something yummy. And we all get the opportunity to do that multiple times a day. (Yay!)

Because I love to think about food, it isn't hard to pick what meals I want to make for my family. The trouble comes when you have to make that decision over and over and over again, every...single...day.

After 15 years of marriage and 11,700 meals prepared (3 meals a day x at least 5 days a week x 52 weeks x 15 years), you can imagine that meal planning has become somewhat of a **chore**. I've heard from friends about how they struggle with what to put on the table each week and how frustrating it can be to go to the grocery store and figure out something to satisfy everyone in the house. That can be so discouraging.

The challenge of meal planning each week can really put a strain on your family. It can consume valuable time and energy, only to be met with unpleasant comments by our

children.

It doesn't have to be that way.

Over the years, our family has developed a system that reduces the amount of rigor required to produce nutritious, satisfying meals each week. My tech savvy husband and I have streamlined our grocery shopping and created a large resource of meals to draw from for future lists. Let me share with you what we have learned to help make the process a lot less painful and (almost) pleasant.

5 Family Meal Planning Tips

#1. Begin Collecting Recipes

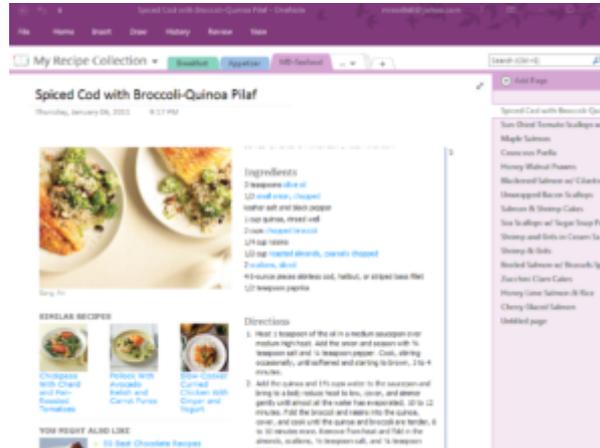
It is a whole lot easier to choose meals for your family when you have a stash of recipes ready to pick from. Now, I don't expect you to adopt recipe collecting as a hobby (and be a food nerd like me), but when you set aside recipes based on what your family likes and the ease of making it, you can filter through them pretty quickly come planning time.

Some Ways to Collect Recipes:

- Food Magazine Clippings – This is my favorite way of collecting ideas for new meals. I think it is the satisfying sound that comes from ripping out the pages. ☐ I have a massive 3-ring binder of newspaper and magazine clippings I have collected over the years. (Taste of Home and Cook's Country are the ones I recommend.)
- Pinterest Boards – Digitally collecting recipes can be a lot easier and faster. You can sign up for a free account on [Pinterest.com](https://www.pinterest.com) and create boards for any category you want. My favorite board (and the one I pin to the most) is [Delectable Desserts](#). If you are feeling

adventurous, you can get the [Pinterest extension](#) for your browser and create pins for any recipe you find online.

- OneNote Recipe Book – This is my second favorite



app for collecting recipes. It is basically a digital notebook where you can type information or paste screen clippings onto pages under separate category tabs. This one is nice, because unlike Pinterest, I can do a search for a particular ingredient through all the pages and clippings.

- Browser Bookmarks – For recipes on the internet, you can bookmark the pages and organize them on your browser. You can also create folders for each type of recipe you are collecting.

Experiment with some of these to find which works best for you

What other ways have you learned to collect recipes? Please let us know in the comments section below.

#2. Consider Categories When Planning

Once you have a stash of recipes to draw from, then you can begin building your menu. A couple of tools that will help expedite and harmonize the process can be found on my [*Freebies* Page](#). The [Family Menu Organizer](#) lists two weeks of meals in an easy to use table. As you begin to assemble your meals, take into consideration what category of main dish you

are choosing.

Some categories to choose from: Pasta, Soup, Sandwiches, Casserole, Rice, Salads, Slow Cooker

Families are most satisfied when a different type of main dish is created each night. Pasta is quick and easy to pair with most foods, but more than 3 times a week can be too much (although I'm sure my boys would disagree). Also, when you are looking for meals, you can narrow down your search by reviewing your menu to see which category you have not chosen yet.

#3. Review Your Schedule and Plan Accordingly

Another consideration to make when meal planning is your family's schedule. Some nights, you won't have much time to make a meal, and pasta would be the quickest choice. On Sunday evenings you may have more time to prepare dinner and may choose to make a casserole. To save time, you may want to cook two meals on one night and refrigerate the casserole to throw in the oven when you get home the next day. Also, to take full advantage of the nutrients in your food, you can make recipes with fresh foods earlier in the week and save the recipes with canned or frozen foods for later in the week.

#4. Build your grocery list as you pick your meals.

Some of you have noticed that I didn't mention the second tool on my [*Freebies* Page](#). The single most thing that has made our family meal planning almost painless was invented by my husband. We use an [Excel Grocery List](#) which is organized by aisles and stores. That may not sound so great, but the most wonderful thing about it is that he and I use it on [Google Sheets](#) and can access it from any of our devices. Whenever I think of something, I just pop it on the list. I can print the list out by grocery store, or whip out my phone when I am shopping. I will go back to it when I am ready to start a new list, clear out the items I don't need anymore and leave any

items we will need to get again. So simple, easy and accessible!

#5. Don't throw away those menus!

My last tip is a bit of encouragement for all the hard work you have gone through to build healthy meals for your family. Keep your menus to use as a future reference and build a "Family Favorites" stash of ideas for the future. Reward yourself for the effort you are making for your family and each time it will get a little bit easier.

If you can put some of these tips into practice, I'm sure you will find that you don't have to dread meal planning anymore.

What about you? Do you have any tips or tricks to share? Please let us know in the comment section below.