



Make-Ahead Freezer Meals to the Rescue

Preparing and freezing family meals in advance will save you time on busy days. This will help you get a hot meal on the dinner table with less stress.

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When we think of devices or equipment in the kitchen that can save us time and energy, items such as the blender, food processor, or microwave oven come to mind. There is, however, another key appliance that can help you decrease the time it takes to get dinner on the table. With the ability to hold cold temperatures and keep food safe for months, the freezer is a superhero appliance that can be used to store prepared dinner entrees. Preparing and freezing meals in advance will save you when there are days filled with a variety of afterschool activities or work commitments. With advance meal preparation serving a hot meal will not require a hectic cooking rampage in the kitchen or a trip to the local fast food establishment. You can simply open the freezer and pull out a dinner entrée ready to be warmed and served.

Successful Make-Ahead Food Safety and Preparation Tips

According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food Safety and Inspection Service, you can freeze almost any food at 0°F and it will stay safe. There are a few exceptions such as eggs that cannot be frozen for later use. Other foods, including mayonnaise, cream sauce, and lettuce, do not freeze well. Recommended storing times for frozen foods vary and are based on food quality only.

Freezer meals require planning

The [USDA MyPlate website](#) is a good place to find information on meal planning. At this site there are tips for healthy eating on a budget, kitchen time savers, recipes and much more.

To get started, prepare double batches of your family's favorite foods. Casseroles, soups and stews are good choices for freezing ahead. Make one batch for now and freeze the second batch for later. Here are basic instructions for freezing casseroles.

To prepare casseroles for freezing:

- Freeze most casseroles before baking, especially if all the ingredients are already cooked. Exceptions are dishes that contain uncooked rice, raw vegetables, or uncooked meat that has been frozen and thawed.
- Undercook starchy ingredients such as potatoes, beans, rice, and noodles or they will become mushy.
- Do not freeze baked pastry. Add the unbaked pastry during reheating.
- Freeze casseroles in shallow containers that are just right for a family meal or individual servings. Shallow baking pans speed freezing and thawing of casseroles.

To freeze:

- If you bake the prepared casserole, cool it quickly. Set the shallow pan of hot food in ice water and cool to room temperature quickly. Wrap, label, and freeze. To package food for the freezer, use heavy-duty foil, moisture-and vapor-proof paper, plastic freezer bags, freezer wrap or freezer containers. Microwave-safe or aluminum ovenproof containers are also available. Pack the containers nearly full to prevent ice crystals from forming, but allow space at the top of the container for expansion. Label the contents of the dish, the date frozen, and the number of servings. Also include baking instructions or where to find the recipe with cooking information.
- To free up baking pans, line the pan with heavy-duty aluminum foil. Leave enough over hang around the pan to cover the casserole and seal. Add ingredients and bake if desired. Cool, cover, and seal airtight. When frozen, remove the foil from the pan, and place the foil package in the freezer. To reheat, simply peel foil from the food, place back in the original baking pan, and bake as directed.

To Serve:

- Use frozen casseroles within three months for best quality.
- The size of the casserole will affect baking time. Remember to use shallow, small dishes instead of deeper, larger dishes to reduce baking time.
- Thaw casserole before reheating by allowing the casserole to stand in the refrigerator overnight. Then cook as directed in the recipe, add 15 to 30 minutes to the cooking time. Use a food thermometer to make sure the casserole reaches an internal temperature of 165°F.

Spaghetti Bake

Ingredients

- 1/2 pound spaghetti
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil

- 1 1/2 cups canned chicken (drained)
- 2 cloves garlic (chopped)
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano (if you like)
- 1/4 teaspoon black pepper
- 2 cans low-sodium tomatoes, not drained (about 15 ounces each)
- 3/4 cup reduced-fat cheddar cheese (shredded)

Directions

- Preheat oven to 350 degrees F.
- Cook spaghetti according to package directions. Drain and place in a 9x9-inch baking dish.
- In a large skillet over medium heat, combine chicken, garlic, and pepper. If using oregano, add that too. Cook in oil until hot, about 5 minutes.
- Stir in tomatoes. Lower the heat and cook for 10 minutes.
- Spoon tomato and chicken mixture over the spaghetti in the baking dish. Sprinkle with cheese.
- Bake for 30 minutes or until hot and bubbling. Serve immediately or cool to room temperature then freeze up to three months.

Nutrition Information:

Total Calories 230, Total Fat 9g, Protein 18g, Carbohydrates 19g, Dietary Fiber 3g, Saturated Fat 3g, Sodium 380mg

Source:

[Make-Ahead Meals](#), Sandra Bastin, PhD, RD, LD, CCE, Extension Food Specialist, The University of Kentucky Extension, 2007