

Families are busy with activities, work schedules and social commitments. Food preparation takes time, requires shopping for ingredients and includes cleanup.

However, the benefits of gathering family and friends around a meal at any time of the day far outweigh the costs. Family mealtimes have many benefits.

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For more information on this and other topics, see www.ag.ndsu.edu/food

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Safety First

Some parents may hesitate to allow their children in the kitchen because hazards are present. With a few precautions, cooking together can be a safe, memorable learning experience.

- Tie long hair back and wear short-sleeved clothing or roll up long sleeves.
- Wash your hands with warm, soapy water for at least 20 seconds.
- Clean the countertops before beginning to prepare food.
- Remind children which surfaces and objects in the kitchen will be hot and what they need to avoid. Show them which utensils are sharp and require close supervision.
- Wash knives immediately after use. Do not put sharp knives in a sink of soapy water, as it can cause cuts.
- Be cautious about cords. Young children can pull appliances off countertops.
- Turn the handles of pots and pans on a stove inward to prevent burns.
- Avoid cross-contamination. Use a clean spoon each time you taste food, or place a small sample in a bowl. Spoons used for taste testing should be placed in a warm sink of soapy water.
- Keep raw protein foods (chicken, meat, etc.) separate from ready-to-eat foods. Use separate cutting boards to cut vegetables and protein foods. Wash all cutting boards, utensils and other cooking equipment in hot, soapy water – or in a dishwasher.
- Visit www.ag.ndsu.edu/food and click on “Food Safety” for more tips.



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A Pocket Guide to
Enjoy More Family Meals

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What’s for Dinner?

With some planning, food preparation can be efficient. Without a plan, you might think a trip to a restaurant is easier. Aim for at least two servings of fruit and three servings of vegetables for each family member every day.

Ask yourself some questions.

Always	Frequently	Sometimes	Almost Never	
☐	☐	☐	☐	How often do you plan meals in advance?
☐	☐	☐	☐	How often do you prepare portions of a meal in advance?
☐	☐	☐	☐	How often do you spend 30 minutes or less preparing a meal?
☐	☐	☐	☐	How often do you use leftovers as the basis for another meal?
☐	☐	☐	☐	How often do you use mixes, frozen dinners and entrees, and ready-to-eat foods in your menu?
☐	☐	☐	☐	If there are others in your household, how often do they help fix meals and clean up?

If you answered “Always” or “Frequently” to the questions, you probably manage your time very well. If you answered “Almost Never,” don’t throw in the dish towel! You can streamline your food preparation.

Benefits of Family Meals

Researchers have been studying the advantages of family meals since the 1940s. From a nutrition perspective, children tend to eat healthier meals when they eat with their family. These meals are higher in fiber, rich in fruits and vegetables, and feature fewer fried foods and sweetened beverages. As a result, frequent family meals are linked with a lower risk of obesity.

Children and teens who eat more often with their families tend to have better grades and vocabulary skills. Meals provide structure, which helps children feel safer and more secure. Family meals may enhance mental health for adults and children.

Social skills and relationships improve during family meals, especially if phones, TVs and other distractions are put aside. Many challenges can be discussed and potentially resolved during conversations around the family table.



Speed Up Meal Preparation

Active time measures the time actually spent preparing a food. Total time measures how long it takes to get a meal ready from start to finish. For instance, if your family gathers around the table at 6 p.m. and you are deciding on the menu at 5:30 p.m., a roast definitely is not on the menu. On the other hand, if you only have a few minutes for preparation but dinner is hours away, a roast makes sense because it requires little active time. To reduce time, keep these suggestions in mind:

- Focus your meal preparation on one part of the meal. If the main course is time-consuming, fix a simple vegetable or salad as a side.
- Use time-saving equipment such as pressure cookers and microwave ovens.
- Use the one-pot or one-pan method to ease cleanup.
- Try a slow cooker for easy preparation. Use liners to speed cleanup.
- Try quick-cooking menu items such as fish, microwave-baked potatoes and vegetables.
- See www.ag.ndsu.edu/food and go to “Meal Preparation” and “Now You’re Cookin’” for many tips about managing your time in the kitchen and “Pinchin’ Pennie\$ in the Kitchen” for budget-stretching ideas.



Invite Kids into the Kitchen

Most children enjoy learning to prepare food. Children vary in their skills, but these are general guidelines for appropriate tasks for children.

Around ages 5 to 7, kids should be able to perform the following tasks with supervision:

- Helping collect ingredients from the cupboards, refrigerator and freezer
- Pouring
- Stirring and mixing ingredients by hand
- Assisting in measuring ingredients
- Setting a timer

Around ages 8 to 10, they may be able to help perform these tasks:

- Preheating the oven to the correct temperature
- Using the microwave
- Using a blender with assistance
- Using a knife to cut, slice or dice ingredients with supervision

Age-appropriate tasks vary for children, depending on their experience in the kitchen.



Let’s Start a Conversation

Talking with each other about the day's happenings can be an enjoyable part of family mealtimes. Remember to keep mealtimes positive; the dinner table is not a place for discipline.

The NDSU Extension Family Table website at www.ag.ndsu.edu/familytable offers many conversation starters and a free emailed newsletter.

Here are some conversation starters for each person at the table – or even during a road trip – to answer:

- Think about your day. If today were a color, what color would it be? Why?
- Who (one person) was the most helpful to you today?
- Who (one person) did you help today? How did you help?
- What is your superpower – what do you do really well?
- What was your pit (low point) and your peach (high point) today?
- Is there a food or recipe that you would like to try if you were feeling extra brave about trying something new?
- Name something that makes you mad and something that makes you grateful.



Be sure to thoroughly rinse all fresh fruits and vegetables before preparing as directed in the recipe. Use a food thermometer to gauge doneness.

See the Now You're Cookin'! series at NDSU Extension for meal planning and preparation tips and recipes. See the Pinchin' Pennie\$ series for ways to use what is already in your pantry to make soups, casseroles, stir-fries and many more. See www.ag.ndsu.edu/food for many recipes and ways to enjoy a variety of foods. Family meals do not need to be elaborate. Even a simple meal shared together can strengthen relationships, encourage healthier eating habits and create lasting memories. Start with one more shared meal this week. Here are several sheet pan recipes to get you started. These offer quick preparation and cleanup.

Sheet Pan Chicken with Butternut Squash

- 6 medium boneless, skinless chicken breasts
- ½ teaspoon salt, divided
- ½ teaspoon black pepper, divided
- 2 tablespoons honey, divided
- 2 tablespoons olive oil, vegetable oil or your favorite cooking oil, divided
- 2 tablespoons brown sugar, divided
- 1 medium apple, diced
- 1 medium butternut squash, peeled and diced
- 1 (12-ounce) package Brussels sprouts, fresh or frozen (thawed), halved
- Parsley for garnish, optional

Preheat oven to 425 F and place the rack in the center of the oven. Prepare a rimmed baking sheet by lining with parchment paper or aluminum foil sprayed with nonstick cooking spray. Season each chicken breast with ¼ teaspoon salt and ¼ teaspoon pepper. Place chicken on the baking sheet and drizzle chicken with 1 tablespoon honey and 1 tablespoon olive oil, then sprinkle with 1 tablespoon brown sugar. Rinse the fruit and vegetables. Chop apple and squash. Add vegetables and apple to a medium bowl and drizzle with 1 tablespoon honey, 1 tablespoon oil, ¼ teaspoon salt, ¼ teaspoon pepper and 1 tablespoon of brown sugar. Toss gently to coat, then arrange the mixture around the chicken on the pan. Roast for 35 to 45 minutes or until chicken reaches a minimum internal temperature of 165 F and the vegetables are tender.

Makes six servings. Each serving has 410 calories, 8 grams (g) fat, 55 g protein, 34 g carbohydrate, 7 g fiber and 365 milligrams sodium.

Sheet Pan Hawaiian Chicken

- 1 ½ pounds chicken breast (or boneless, skinless chicken thighs), cubed
- Salt and black pepper (to taste)
- 1 tablespoon canola oil (or your favorite oil)
- 1 large red bell pepper, diced
- 1 large orange bell pepper, diced
- ½ red onion, cut into chunks
- ½ cup barbecue sauce (additional for optional topping)
- 1 cup pineapple chunks, canned (drained) or fresh
- Juice of 1 lime
- Chopped cilantro and white sesame seeds for garnish
- 6 cups cooked brown or white rice for serving

Preheat oven to 350 F and prepare a rimmed baking sheet lined with parchment paper or aluminum foil sprayed with nonstick cooking spray. In a large mixing bowl, season chicken with salt, pepper and a drizzle of oil. Next, add bell peppers, red onion and barbecue sauce to chicken. Use your hands (wearing plastic kitchen gloves if available), tongs or a spoon to mix until the ingredients are evenly coated. Spread the mixture in an even layer on the prepared baking sheet. Bake for 20 minutes, then remove the pan and add pineapple chunks. Return to the oven for 15 to 20 minutes or until chicken reaches an internal temperature of at least 165 F. Remove sheet pan from the oven and squeeze lime juice over the mixture. Garnish with cilantro and sesame seeds if desired. Serve with a side of rice.

Makes six servings. Each serving (with rice) has 470 calories, 6 grams (g) fat, 32 g protein, 71 g carbohydrate, 5 g fiber and 320 milligrams sodium.



Sheet Pan Open-Face Tuna Melts

- ½ cup bell pepper, diced
- ¼ cup red onion, chopped
- ½ cup celery, chopped
- 4 (5-ounce) cans tuna in water, drained
- ⅓ cup light mayo
- 1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
- 1 teaspoon ground black pepper, or to taste
- 6 slices of wheat bread
- ¾ cup shredded Colby Jack cheese, or cheese of choice

Preheat oven to 375 F and line a baking sheet with parchment paper or aluminum foil sprayed with nonstick cooking spray. Rinse bell pepper, onion and celery. Chop the vegetables, then add to a medium-sized bowl. Open and drain cans of tuna before adding to the bowl of chopped vegetables. In another bowl, combine mayonnaise, Dijon mustard and black pepper. Mix until well combined. Place slices of bread on baking sheet and spread an even amount of tuna mixture on each slice before topping with cheese. Bake in the oven for 12 to 15 minutes, until the edges of the bread become toasted, the cheese is bubbly and everything is heated through.

Makes six servings. Each serving has 234 calories, 9 grams (g) fat, 24 g protein, 16 g carbohydrate, 2.5 g fiber and 570 milligrams sodium.

Sheet Pan Crispy Tacos

- 1 pound ground turkey or extra-lean ground beef, cooked and drained, or shredded rotisserie chicken
- 1 medium tomato, diced
- 3 cups iceberg lettuce, shredded
- 12 (6-inch) flour tortillas, white or wheat
- 1 cup refried beans (or canned pinto or black beans, drained and rinsed)
- 1 ½ cups Mexican blend cheese, shredded
- 1-2 tablespoon(s) olive oil, canola oil or oil of choice

Sauce

- 1 cup plain Greek yogurt or light sour cream
- 1 tablespoon lime juice
- 2 teaspoons low sodium taco seasoning
- 1 teaspoon honey

Preheat oven to 400 F and line a large baking sheet with parchment paper or aluminum foil sprayed with nonstick cooking spray. Brown the ground meat or shred the chicken. Rinse the tomato and lettuce. Dice the tomato and shred the lettuce, and set aside. Spread beans on half of each tortilla. Add the cooked ground meat or chicken on the other half. Make sure the layering is even so it cooks properly. Sprinkle cheese on top before folding in half to make tacos. Brush the side of the tacos that are facing up with oil and place in oven. Bake for 20 to 25 minutes, flipping halfway through and brushing the other side of the taco with oil to allow both sides to get crispy. While the tacos are cooking, add the Greek yogurt, lime juice, seasoning and honey in a small bowl and mix well. Remove tacos from oven, open and top with lettuce, tomatoes and a drizzle of the sauce.

With ground turkey: Makes 12 servings. Each serving has 245 calories, 11 grams (g) fat, 19 g protein, 23 g carbohydrate, 2 g fiber and 320 milligrams sodium.

With extra lean ground beef: Makes 12 servings. Each serving has 250 calories, 10 grams (g) fat, 18 g protein, 23 g carbohydrate, 2 g fiber and 320 milligrams sodium.



Sheet Pan Paprika Chicken and Vegetables

- 6 chicken thighs
- ¼ teaspoon salt, divided
- 1 pound Brussels sprouts, trimmed and halved*
- 2 sweet potatoes, peeled and cubed
- 2 shallots, peeled and quartered (or substitute ½ mild onion)
- 3 ½ teaspoons garlic, minced, divided
- 3 tablespoons olive oil (plus more for drizzling)
- 1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice

Spice mixture, divided according to the recipe directions

- 2 tablespoons paprika
- 1 teaspoon dried cilantro
- 1 teaspoon allspice

Preheat oven to 425 F and line a rimmed baking sheet with parchment paper or aluminum foil sprayed with nonstick cooking spray. Sprinkle chicken lightly with salt on both sides and set aside. Place the Brussels sprouts, sweet potatoes and shallots on the prepared pan. Season the vegetables lightly with salt. Drizzle with oil, then toss the vegetables to mix. In a small bowl, mix the spices. Sprinkle 1 tablespoon of the spice mixture over the vegetables. To the remaining spice mixture, add 2 teaspoons garlic, 3 tablespoons olive oil and 1 tablespoon lemon juice, and stir into a paste. Brush the chicken, including under the skin, with this paste. Add chicken to the pan and sprinkle remaining minced garlic over the chicken and vegetables. Roast for about 30 to 35 minutes, or until the chicken reaches an internal temperature of 165 F and the vegetables are tender.

*Frozen Brussels sprouts can be used, but thaw in the refrigerator or microwave before using in this recipe.

Makes six servings. Each serving has 430 calories, 26 grams (g) fat, 27 g protein, 19 g carbohydrate, 6 g fiber and 535 milligrams sodium.

Sheet Pan Sausage, Zucchini and Gnocchi Pasta

- 2 medium zucchini, sliced
- ¾ pound potato gnocchi*
- ⅓ pound Italian sausage or turkey sausage
- 1 ½ tablespoons olive oil
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon black pepper
- ¼-½ teaspoon red pepper flakes
- 2 tablespoons garlic, minced
- 2 tablespoons butter or olive oil
- ⅓ cup shredded Parmesan cheese, for topping

Preheat oven to 400 F and line a rimmed baking sheet with parchment paper or aluminum foil sprayed with nonstick cooking spray. Slice zucchini into half-moons. Place zucchini, gnocchi, sausage, olive oil, seasonings and garlic in a single layer, crumbling the sausage across the pan. Bake in the oven for 30 minutes, turning halfway through baking. After removing from the oven, add butter or olive oil and shredded Parmesan cheese. Toss again before serving.

*Gnocchi is available in the freezer section of many grocery stores.

Makes six servings. Each serving has 230 calories, 15 grams (g) fat, 7 g protein, 15 g carbohydrate, 1 g fiber and 574 milligrams sodium.



Sheet Pan Salmon with Roasted Asparagus and Balsamic Glaze

- 1 ½ pounds fresh asparagus, trimmed
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 2 tablespoons honey
- 2 tablespoons maple syrup
- 2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar
- ½-1 teaspoon black pepper
- ¼ tablespoon garlic powder
- 4 medium salmon fillets

Preheat oven to 400 F and prepare a rimmed baking sheet by lining with parchment paper or aluminum foil sprayed with nonstick cooking spray. Rinse the asparagus and trim off the woody ends before arranging them on the baking sheet in an even layer. In a small bowl, mix together oil, honey, maple syrup, vinegar and seasonings; whisk to combine. Use a brush to spread some of the glaze over the asparagus, then lay the salmon fillets, skin side down, on top of the asparagus and brush with the remaining glaze. Bake asparagus and salmon for 20 to 30 minutes or until the asparagus is fork-tender and the salmon flakes with a fork and reaches a minimum internal temperature of 145 F.

Makes four servings. Each serving has 565 calories, 21 grams (g) fat, 69 g protein, 24 g carbohydrate, 3.5 g fiber and 246 milligrams sodium.

Sheet Pan Beef Sirloin or Chicken Fajitas

- 1 ½ pounds sirloin steak (or boneless, skinless chicken breasts), cut into ½-inch strips
- 2 red bell peppers, sliced into strips
- 1 green bell pepper, sliced into strips
- 1 onion, sliced into strips
- 1 packet reduced-sodium taco seasoning
- 3 tablespoons olive or canola oil
- 1 lime
- 10 (6-inch) whole-wheat tortillas
- Optional toppings: shredded cheese, salsa, sour cream, avocado slices

Preheat oven to 425 F and prepare a rimmed baking sheet by lining with parchment paper or aluminum foil sprayed with nonstick cooking spray. Prepare ingredients as directed. Place the steak or chicken, bell peppers and onion in a large bowl. Sprinkle with taco seasoning and drizzle with oil. Toss until evenly coated. Spread the mixture in an even layer on a baking sheet. Bake for 20 to 25 minutes or until the meat is fully cooked. Chicken should reach a minimum internal temperature of 165 F. Beef should reach a safe internal temperature based on the desired degree of doneness. Squeeze lime juice over the mixture and serve with whole-wheat tortillas and optional toppings.

Makes 10 servings (one fajita per serving). When prepared with chicken and no added toppings, each fajita has 240 calories, 8 grams (g) fat, 20 g protein, 27 g carbohydrate, 3.5 g fiber and 290 milligrams sodium.

Makes 10 servings (one fajita per serving). When prepared with beef and no added toppings, each fajita has 260 calories, 9 grams (g) fat, 19 g protein, 25 g carbohydrate, 4 g fiber and 290 milligrams sodium.

