

# the real dish

with *Lauren*  
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## Planning for *Change*

**WHEN LIFE FEELS CHAOTIC**, whether from illness, change in work, returning from travel, or any other curve balls life throws, it can be hard to keep up with our regular cooking and eating routines. Eating consistently throughout the day can help your energy levels while giving you the nourishment you need to tackle whatever obstacles you're facing. Despite big (or small) life changes, it can be helpful to plan for nourishing meals and snacks. And a few well-planned ideas for your freezer or pantry mean you won't have to scramble at the last minute to find something to eat.

When planning ahead, be realistic about what types of foods you'll want to eat when you're tired or not feeling well or recovering from treatment. Only stockpiling "healthy" foods might make you more likely to skip meals or order takeout when the time comes, because you just can't face eating something you feel lukewarm about.

If you know about an upcoming life change in advance, it can be helpful to do a little stockpiling




ahead of time. Using your freezer and pantry wisely will help you have foods you can rely on when everything else might be up in the air.



### Freezer Tips

One of the major benefits to cooking large batches of foods is the leftovers it can provide to save time for you in the future.

Freezing leftover [soups](#), [chilis](#), [lasagnas](#), [casseroles](#), and even [meat](#) can be extremely helpful when time and energy is limited.



*Frozen fruits* and veggies can be added as a healthy and tasty “booster” to virtually all of your favorite foods, all year through.

Especially if you have a big event like surgery or a trip coming up, use the weeks ahead to double up on what you’re already making so that you can [tuck some away in the freezer](#) for when you’re back home.

Use freezer-safe packaging and allow hot items to cool completely before putting food in the freezer. Label foods with their name, any reheating or cooking instructions, and the date so you’re not digging through mystery items.

Think about what foods you enjoy eating for the season, as most frozen foods should be used within about 1-3 months for them to taste their best. Also consider portion sizes, since you don’t want to re-freeze foods after they’ve thawed.

If cooking isn’t an option for you, consider the freezer aisle at the grocery store and pick a few items that require minimal effort, like a premade lasagna, perogies, pasta dishes, chicken dishes, seafood, rice bowls, pizzas and more. Consider what else you’d like to round out the meal—frozen vegetables, fruit, rice, bread? Frozen foods can be a great option to supplement what you already have at home or provide a whole meal when you’re not up for cooking.

Keep in mind that many freezer meals can be higher in sodium, so you might want to compare a few brands and try to find items that are lower

in sodium, if possible. Don’t let perfection be the enemy of the good: If a frozen meal is higher in sodium than you would like, find some other ways to increase the nutritional value for you. An example of this could be buying a frozen pizza and adding on fresh or frozen veggies, or adding beans or lentils to a frozen rice bowl or pasta dish. And if all you can muster is the effort to heat up some frozen food, that’s okay, you’re still nourishing your body... Don’t let food be one more stressor.

## Frozen Fruits and Vegetables

Although we most commonly hear about fresh produce, frozen fruits and vegetables are just as nutritious as fresh produce. Because these fruits and vegetables are flash frozen at the peak of freshness, they’re a nutritious, convenient, cost-effective option.

Adding frozen fruit on top of yogurt, pancakes, ice cream, [chia pudding](#), or [oatmeal](#) can be a great way to boost the nutritional value of a meal or snack. Other ways to utilize frozen fruit include making a smoothie, a fruit cobbler,



sorbet, or adding them to a muffin or cake mix. Frozen vegetables might even be more versatile and can be added to a variety of savory dishes.

Some ways to incorporate frozen vegetables include adding them to [stir-fries](#), pasta dishes, [pizzas](#), [rice bowls](#), [casseroles](#), soups, pot pies, [curries](#), dips, stuffed shells, bean salads, having frozen edamame as a snack, adding frozen cauliflower to oatmeal or [smoothies](#), and incorporating them however you can find them useful for your lifestyle. Adding in frozen fruits and vegetables is a great way to get more fiber, variety, and antioxidants into your diet.

Focusing on overall lifestyle habits like incorporating more produce (whether fresh, frozen or canned!) can reduce your risk for high blood pressure, diabetes and some types of cancers.

## Pantry Staples

Having a well-stocked pantry can also help keep you nourished when you know you'll be too busy or tired to do much cooking or shopping. Keep in mind your food groups so you can throw together easy meals:

- **Grains:** Popcorn, crackers, cereals, couscous, bread, tortillas
- **Canned fruits** (in juice or water) **or canned vegetables** (low sodium)
- **Proteins:** Canned beans (low sodium), tuna, salmon, sardines, chicken, nut butters, tofu (some are shelf stable while others should



*Go easy on yourself:*

Keeping your pantry full of easy-to-prepare foods that you enjoy, gives you options for meals you love at any time.

be stored in the fridge), nuts and seeds (although they'll last longer in the freezer).

- **Fats** (some of these may need refrigeration after opening): Sauces, salad dressings, finishing oils (sesame, flavored olive oils), mayonnaise...These tend to be the items that will round out a meal, making it more cohesive, satisfying and tasty.

Having a couple of items you know you can rely on without having to go shopping can be just what you need for those chaotic or exhausting days when you need to eat something but don't have much left in the refrigerator.



*What are* your favorite easy, throw-together meals? What do you always like to have on hand in the freezer or pantry? Let us know in

the [UM St. Joseph Medical Center Barbara L. Posner Wellness & Support Center](#) Facebook Group!