

Quick Meal Tips for Busy Families

Are you spending more time at the drive-thru window than you'd like or calling for pizza more often than not? If so, these tips will help you reclaim the family dinner meal.

1. **Develop a system.** The first step is to realize you need a cooking system and to develop one that will work for your family's lifestyle.
2. **How much available time do you have?** Look at the family schedule for the week and break it into three categories, no time to cook, 15 minutes to cook, and 30 minutes to cook. By doing so, you know how much time you have to prep, cook and serve.
3. **Too busy to cook.** On the nights when it's impossible to cook, plan to make a slow cooker meal by preparing it before you walk out the door in the morning.
4. **Got 15 minutes?** On the 15-minute nights, you'll want to make something quick like a casserole dish you can cook in the microwave or a make-your-own hoagie with deli meats, cheeses and rolls.
5. **Double it up.** For the 30-minute meals, consider doubling the main ingredient of the entrée so you can use it as the foundation of another meal later in the week.
6. **Too mentally drained to cook.** For hectic days when you know you'll have the time to prepare something, but you'll be too road-weary to make anything that takes some concentration, switch things up and have a backwards meal (breakfast fixings for supper).
7. **Cook once, eat seven times.** For a week that's extremely busy, cook a turkey or ham on Sunday and use the leftovers as a foundation for a week's worth of entrees. You can make turkey and rice, turkey over noodles, turkey nachos to name a few.
8. **Whip up kid-friendly meals.** Keep a handful of kid-friendly recipes and ingredients ready. Frozen bagels, pizza sauce and cheese or nachos and cheese will be among their favorites.
9. **Keep pantry meals on hand.** Be sure to keep two or three pantry meals on hand. Pantry meals consist of noodles or rice, canned chicken, ham or tuna, canned cream soup, canned veggies and a favorite seasoning and a box of pasta and jarred sauce.

“A bare pantry makes it hard to toss something together,” says Mary Jo. “Plan ahead. Walking in the front door at the five o’clock whistle, trying to scan the empty kitchen shelves for a quick meal is the prelude to calling 1-800-takeout.”

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Mary Jo Rulnick is the author of *The Frantic Woman’s Guide to Feeding Family and Friends* (Warner Books) and coauthor of *The Frantic Woman’s Guide to Life* (Warner Books). An award-winning writer, she hit the number one author spot with her current book on Internet Book Database. She has been coined the Do-It-Yourself expert and has been featured or quoted in national woman’s publications and she’s a frequent television and radio guest on stations throughout the country. Visit Mary Jo at www.FastTrackWoman.com.