



Menu planning saves hours of time, energy, money, and headaches, but it's easy to overcomplicate the process. And when that happens, it becomes a burden instead of a blessing. So why do it at all?

Cooking is one area in life that I can keep relatively under control, if I take a few basic steps to do it simply and thoughtfully. To make the job of feeding my family enjoyable and cost-effective, I rely on menu planning.

All menu planning really means is that you plan ahead of time what meals you'll cook. What are the benefits?

- You can extract a grocery list from your menu choices.
- Because you buy only what you need, less food is wasted.
- You know with plenty of notice what's for dinner—no more frantic 5 p.m. craziness.
- Cooking is more enjoyable, because you'll have what you need on hand.
- You'll have more variety, because you've planned it.
- It's healthier, and it cuts down on drive-thru runs.
- It's cheaper, too, because you're eating out less, you can menu plan around your coupons, and you can intentionally cook with seasonal ingredients.

HOW FAR IN ADVANCE SHOULD YOU PLAN YOUR MENU?

It's really up to you and your family. Different seasons call for different types of home management, so if your current season is more hectic than usual, perhaps a simple menu planned for an entire month is ideal. If you like variety or experimenting, then maybe planning just a week at a time works well.

I recommend menu planning at least a week at a time, and not going farther in advance than a month. This way, you've got enough menus planned to make it worth your while, yet are not so scheduled that it becomes too big a chore.

WHAT'S THE PERFECT, IDEAL WAY TO MENU PLAN?

Well, I don't know the perfect way—but I know how I usually do it. I plan two weeks at a time, and repeat those weeks at least once. This way, I've got around a

month planned at minimum. We're pretty easy-going eaters, and don't mind repeating a meal every other week—after all, that's only having it twice per month, more or less.

I use Google Calendar ([google.com/calendar](https://www.google.com/calendar)) to plan my menus. It's streamlined with my Gmail account, so I can have it e-mail me my day's menu and recipes each morning.

HOW I USE THE INTERNET TO PLAN MY MENU:

1. A few days before the new month begins, I open Google Calendar. You can create different sub-calendars; I've got one labeled "Menu Plan." I keep both this one and my "Events & Appointments" calendars open (so that I know which events I need to plan around). I also set it to the monthly view.
2. In a separate tab, I open either my Delicious recipes (lvs.m.pl/oaHGTL) or my "I'd Eat That" pinboard on

Pinterest ([lvsm.pl/oHfa86](https://www.pinterest.com/lvsm.pl/oHfa86)). I also enjoy using Plan to Eat ([lvsm.pl/rmDSda](https://www.pinterest.com/lvsm.pl/rmDSda)), and many other people use [Evernote.com](https://www.evernote.com). Find a tool that you enjoy using.

3. Back in my Calendar, I click on a day, enter the name of the meal, set it on the Menu Plan calendar, and go to “edit event details.” I paste the recipe URL in the description.

4. Here’s an important part—under “Repeats,” I choose “Repeat every 2 weeks.” This will automatically plug in this recipe on this day, every other week, until I change it.

5. Under “Reminder,” I choose to have an e-mail reminder sent to my Gmail account for that morning – it’s a helpful reminder for what I need to get ready for dinner.

Because I repeat my recipes every two weeks, I only have to fill out two weeks of menus to have an entire month filled. At the end of the month, I can keep the recipes on the menu, or I can switch them out and repeat this process.

Now, I don’t have an elaborate menu planned for each dinner. Far from it! We have some classic standbys that we make weekly – stir fry, homemade pizza, tacos, and pasta, to name a few. We keep variety alive with super-easy seasonal side dishes, like salad, sliced fruit, and basic steamed or roasted veggies.

I also only plan our dinners. Lunches are almost always leftovers, and if there aren’t any (there usually are), we do sandwiches, quesadillas, salads, or finger foods. For breakfast, we rotate between bacon and eggs, oatmeal, cold cereal, scones or muffins with fruit, Dutch babies, pancakes, and granola.

Pick one upcoming evening with your cookbooks (either paper or digital), and whip up a simple menu plan for the week. If you feel like a plan is too rigid, hang on the fridge a list of recipes to make for the next two weeks, and check it off once you’ve made it. Use this list to create your grocery list.

What are your family’s favorite go-to recipes? I’m always looking for more – let me know at [facebook.com/simplemomblog](https://www.facebook.com/simplemomblog).

