

## Healthy Meals in 30 Minutes or Less Susan Bowerman, MS, RD, CSSD, FAND

*Preparing healthy meals doesn't require hours in the kitchen. When your freezer, refrigerator and pantry are well-stocked, you can put together a healthy meal in less than 30 minutes.*

Setting aside some time to prepare a healthy meal at home may sound like an impossible task – especially if you think it's going to require hours of your time. When your life is busy and overbooked, spending a little time cooking at home may not be a high priority - and it just seems easier to simply eat out or order in.

You really can prepare a healthy, home-cooked meal in 30 minutes or so, as long as you're willing to spend a little time to plan ahead – making sure that you're freezer, refrigerator and pantry are stocked with the everyday basics.

And the rewards can be really great. When you cook your own healthy meals, it not only saves you money, but you also have complete control over ingredients, calories and portions. And, when you've got all the ingredients on hand, cooking a healthy meal can be a fun and creative way to unwind at the end of the day.

### What to Keep in Your Freezer for Quick, Healthy Meals

- **Fish filets** – so easy to use, since they don't need to be thawed before cooking
- **Shrimp** – cooked or raw; Great for soups, salads, and stir-fries
- **Loose-pack vegetables** – great for sprinkling into soups, pasta dishes, omelets.
- **Loose-pack fruit** –for adding to shakes and yogurt
- **Cooked brown rice or other grains** – Make extra when you cook them, then portion into containers and freeze. They reheat quickly in the microwave.
- **Nuts** –last longer if stored in the freezer; nice to add a healthy crunch to salads or vegetables

### What to Keep in Your Refrigerator for Quick, Healthy Meals

- **Milk or soymilk** – for shakes
- **Eggs** – for omelets, baked egg cups (see below) or added to soups
- **Plain Yogurt** – thick, Greek-style yogurt stands in nicely for sour cream
- **Tofu** – dice and add to soups and curries, or try it roasted
- **Salsa, ketchup, mustard** – all low fat ways to add lots of flavor to dishes
- **Citrus fruits and apples** are fairly long-lasting. Add fruits to salads for a nice flavor contrast, or use citrus juices in cooking
- **Peppers, celery, carrots** usually last longer than leafy vegetables
- **Pre-washed salad greens, spinach, kale or cabbage** –super-convenient for putting together a side salad in minutes

### What to Keep in Your Cupboards for Quick, Healthy Meals

- **Canned tomatoes** – make a great base for soups, chili and pasta sauce
- **Canned beans** – ready to be turned into a soup, curry or hummus dip
- **Quick-cooking whole grains** – quick brown rice, millet, quinoa, couscous, whole grain pasta, freekeh (roasted green wheat) for high-fiber side dishes

- **Canned tuna and salmon** – to add to salads, pasta sauce or turned into ‘burgers’
- **Variety of vinegars** – such as rice, balsamic, cider
- **Dried herbs and spices** – for endless flavor variations
- **Broths** – such as chicken, vegetable, mushroom
- **Oils** – olive and canola for cooking, others such as sesame, walnut for flavor
- **Sauces** – such as soy sauce, Tabasco, steak sauce, Worcestershire
- **Onions and garlic** – store these staples in a cool, dark place

### 30-Minute Meal Ideas Using Everyday Basics

Once you’ve got all your basics on-hand, it’s time to let your imagination run wild. Since none of these basics require extended cooking times, it shouldn’t take more than 30 minutes to prepare your healthy meal. Here are some meal ideas for putting a delicious, healthy meal on the table quickly.

- **Curried vegetables and chickpeas.** Saute ½ diced onion and one diced zucchini in olive oil until soft. Add two tomatoes, seeded and chopped and season with curry powder, ginger, garlic, cumin, cinnamon and cayenne. Add a can of chickpeas (drained), ½ cup (125mL) chicken or vegetable broth, squeeze of fresh lemon. Add frozen spinach leaves, cover, cook until heated thoroughly. Adjust seasonings. Serve on reheated frozen brown rice and top with a dollop of plain Greek-style yogurt.
- **Pasta with tomato sauce and shrimp.** Drain a large can of chopped plum-style tomatoes and sauté in a little olive oil over medium-high heat for 10-15 minutes until soft enough to mash with a fork. Season with salt, pepper, garlic and basil. Add frozen shrimp and cook in the sauce until shrimp is cooked through. Serve on top of whole wheat pasta.
- **Vegetable egg cups.** This dish makes an easy, light dinner with a salad on the side. Spray cups of a muffin tin liberally with pan spray or olive oil. In each cup, add a few tablespoons of any chopped vegetables you like (frozen spinach or broccoli, onions, peppers). Beat one egg for each muffin cup you prepare. Pour egg mixture over the vegetables and bake at 375 degrees (gas mark 5) for about 20 minutes until puffed and golden.
- **Salmon cakes.** Mix flaked canned salmon with chopped vegetables, light sour cream, whole grain bread crumbs, Dijon mustard, lemon. Form into patties and cook in a little oil until brown on both sides.
- **Quick black bean soup.** Saute ½ chopped onion in a little olive oil until soft. Add a can of black beans (drained), two cups (500mL) chicken broth and season with cumin, garlic, oregano and heat thoroughly. Mash some of the beans with a fork to thicken the soup. Delicious topped with some plain yogurt, diced avocado, a spoonful of salsa.
- **Glazed chicken tenderloins.** Season chicken tenderloins (goujons) with salt and pepper. Brown chicken pieces on one side in a little olive oil in single layer in a large skillet. Turn chicken over, add a few tablespoons water, broth, wine, balsamic vinegar, or citrus juice; cover, lower heat and cook 5 minutes until cooked

through. Remove chicken pieces from skillet, turn heat back to high and cook juices until reduced to a glaze. Turn off heat, add chicken pieces back to pan and turn to coat. Serve with veggies and quinoa.

- **Fish tacos.** Rinse frozen fish filets quickly to remove any ice. Pat dry, season with salt and pepper and sauté in a little canola oil until browned on one side. Turn, cover and cook until fish can be flaked easily with a fork. While fish is cooking, mix some pre-shredded cabbage with a little olive oil, lime juice, pinch of sugar, salt and pepper. Top corn tortillas with fish, cabbage mixture and salsa.
- **Quick soba noodle soup.** Heat four cups (one liter) vegetable or chicken broth with a dash of soy sauce, sprinkle of ginger, garlic powder, white pepper and a drizzle of sesame oil. Bring to a boil, then add 1 bundle (three ounces, 90g) dry soba noodles and cook until noodles are almost done. Add diced tofu, handful of edamame soybeans and some chopped spinach from the freezer and continue cooking until heated through. You can also drizzle in a beaten egg for some extra protein at the last minute – it will cook quickly in the heated broth.
- **Curried tuna and whole grain salad.** Toss cooked and cooled whole grain (couscous or quinoa are particularly good for this) with chopped vegetables (try spring onion, cucumber and carrots) and canned water-packed tuna. Add some diced fruit (apple, orange, mango) and dress with olive oil, rice vinegar, curry powder, salt and pepper.