

## Meal Planning

What type of meal planner are you? You may not be a meal planner at all. Of all the topics I get asked about the most frequent is meal planning. If you're like me, you are consistent and routine. This means your breakfast, lunch and snacks are pretty much the same for most days and you have some slight variation on the weekend. Dinners are where I get most of my variety, but even then, it is usually some meat, some grains like pasta or rice and a good serve of vegetables, with a glass of red.

On the other hand you may not plan at all. You wake up in the morning, take a look in the fridge or pantry and put together something based on what's available for breakfast. For lunch you may put together a mish-mash of foods or simply buy something at work. Your snack may be a visit to the vending machine and dinner will involve popping into the supermarket on the way home or going to a local restaurant.

Now either way of getting your daily nourishment is fine but one of the most common complaints from people wanting to eat healthier, have more energy and to lose weight is gaining control over what they eat. Gaining control is all about planning your meals

So where do you start.

First you need to take a look at the timing of your meals. Traditional eating patterns include breakfast, lunch and dinner. The gaps between these meals for most people are too long so snacks between meals is the best way to go. I personally recommend this eating pattern simply because it helps maintain energy levels throughout the day and minimises the likelihood of over eating. It also allows for greater nourishment because you can maximise a greater variety of foods through snacks.

Now I'm not suggesting this eating pattern is for everyone. If you have been a three square meals a day person and it works stick with it. But if you are struggling with energy, lacking concentration and feel sluggish in the afternoon, snacks between meals may help.

Once you know your eating patterns the best place to start is breakfast. Some people say breakfast is the most important meal of the day. A good breakfast should always start with energy food and the best energy foods are those with carbohydrate in them. This includes nutritious grains like muesli, oats, fruits and grainy cereals and breads. Included with these is some protein containing foods which can include milk, yoghurt or eggs. Some classic combinations can be a simple muesli with low fat milk to scrambled eggs on toast or a combination of oats, yoghurt and a berry mix. Keep your serving sizes in check by having around half a cup of muesli or oats or if you go the eggs on toast, always go for a nice grainy bread or even sourdough or buckwheat loaf.

For lunch there is one food which is non-negotiable and it is salad. Everyone should have a salad at lunch time. Why? Because people need to eat more vegetables. Trying to get all your vegetables in at dinner time can be too hard and the extra fibre in your diet at lunch time will help with sustaining energy for longer to get you through the afternoon. The key to a great salad is plenty of colour, so think carrots, the varieties of capsicum and lettuce and cabbage. It should be a minimum of two cups in size, the more the better I say. You can add some low fat feta cheese and some lean meat like chicken, beef or lamb. To back up your salad a sandwich or even a small bread roll will provide some much needed slow release energy for the afternoon slog to home time.

For dinner it goes without saying meat and vegetables is the way to go. Now whether this is through a stir fry or a simple grilled steak with some steamed vegetables it does not really matter. There are plenty of meat varieties but some guidelines need to be considered. Try and keep your red meat intake down to around 3-4 times a week and try and eat fish at least 2-3 times a week. Chicken or other poultry is fine to have regularly and consider going meat free every once in a while

and try some beans, legumes or lentils as alternatives to meat. If you find the meat and vegetable doesn't quite fill you, consider a half cup serve of some rice, pasta or noodles just to provide a little more energy and fibre.

As for your morning or afternoon snacks my personal favourites include fruit, a serve of mixed nuts, a 200 gram tub reduced fat Greek yoghurt or a few vita-weats with cottage or ricotta cheese. The key to snacking is to eat when you start to feel hungry and avoid eating too much of a snack so you are full. Snacking is about providing a little nutrition between meals so you avoid overeating at your main meals.

For meal planning to work all the food you need for the week needs to be ready at the start of the week. What you don't want to be doing is ducking into the shops every day because temptation may take over. Create a shopping list and head to supermarket over the weekend, preferably after lunch, and buy everything you need. If you have the time, a little meal preparation on the weekend can go a long way and will give you more time to do other things rather than spending too much time in the kitchen.

As the saying goes, prior planning prevents poor performance. To ensure you are performing well, plan your meals.

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