



preparation is *everything*

Having meals on hand helps you feel in control

Planning and freezing meals makes those first few weeks easier **BY BRETTE MCWHORTER SEMBER**

The first few weeks at home with a new baby are a time of adjustment and wonder. Unfortunately, this often means major adjustments to your schedule as you wonder why you don't have time or energy to cook anymore. Planning ahead will make this time much easier for you and your family and help you avoid the cost and hassle of getting last-minute takeout.

With very little effort, meals and dishes can be prepared and frozen in advance so that all you have to do is a little re-heating to have a healthy meal on the table. "I felt scattered and disorganized after coming home with the new baby. Having meals on hand was a tremendous relief to my mental state," says Angie Ledbetter of Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

MAINTAINING NORMALCY

Preparing and freezing meals ahead of time will not only make your life easier, but will help maintain an air of normalcy so that your older children can adjust to the new baby more easily. Preparing food in advance was important to Angie Best-Boss' family in Anderson, Indiana. "We ate together every night so there was some consistency in our lives, even though life had changed considerably."

COOL IDEAS FOR FREEZER FOOD

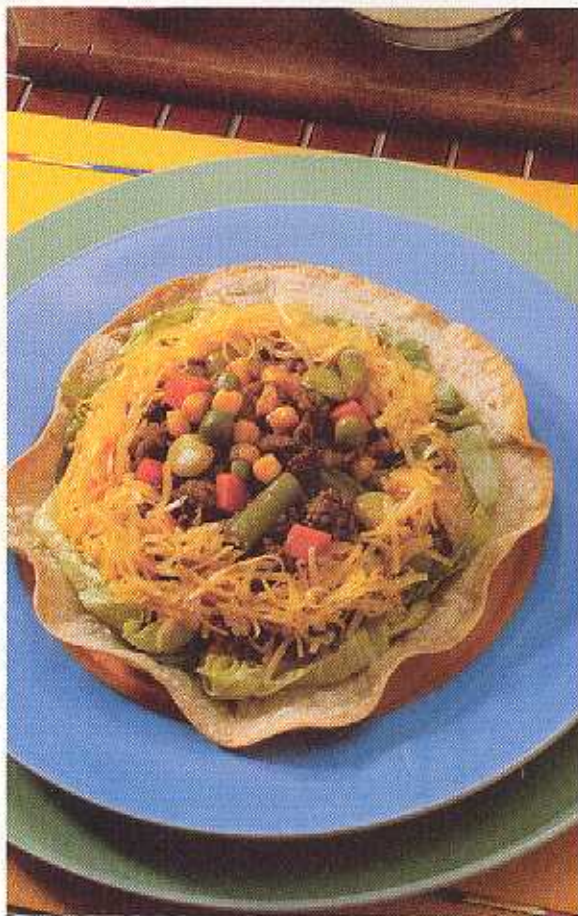
When Diane Dobry of Bethpage, New York, learned her baby was due just before Christmas, she refused to let that stand in the way of a delicious holiday meal for her >



family. She prepared and froze appetizers, a bean casserole, potatoes au gratin, pie, cookie dough, and raisin sauce for a ham.

Although you probably don't need to freeze an entire holiday dinner, you can prepare many dishes and meals in advance. The easiest way to build up a supply of frozen meals is to double or triple recipes you make in your last few months of pregnancy. Freeze the extras, and soon you will have a freezer stocked with home-cooked meals your family enjoys.

Not all foods freeze well. Dietitian and nutrition professor Debra Barone Sheats warns, "Products that contain eggs, mayonnaise, cream, or cheese sauces don't freeze well and often will separate." Registered dietitian Stacey Norris says, "Foods with sauces [other than cheese] or gravies generally freeze better."



Simplicity rules when it comes to meal preparation

for families, especially ones with a new baby

For best results, stick to dishes that use combinations of ingredients. A casserole freezes well while a cooked roast does not. Rice dishes, soups, layered dishes, stews, lasagna, and pasta dishes are good freezer candidates.

Cook large amounts of meat or poultry and use it in various dishes to build up your freezer supply. While pregnant, Wendy Fix of Bismarck, North Dakota, prepared a 20-pound turkey with stuffing and froze it into individual portions. She used the rest of the turkey in casseroles, chili, and lasagna, which she also froze.



"Simplicity rules when it comes to meal preparation for families, especially ones with a brand new baby," points out Elizabeth Ward, registered dietitian and author of *Pregnancy Nutrition: Good*

Health for You and Your Baby. "One-dish meals are good because they typically combine meat or poultry with vegetables, so rounding out the meal with fruit, salad and/or grains is easy."

Registered dietitian and author of *Power Eating and High Performance Nutrition*, Susan Kleiner points out, "Soups can't be beat...Defrost and serve with bread, salad, and cheese, and it's a meal." This advice holds true for any frozen dish. Serve with frozen or canned fruits or vegetables and a loaf of bread, and you have a complete meal.

Plan on freezing meals during your seventh and eighth months of pregnancy, before you reach the total fatigue of the last few weeks of pregnancy.

TIPS FOR FREEZING AND DEFROSTING

- Label and date every item you freeze.
- Tightly close all containers.
- Freeze some items in family-size portions and other items in individual portions to allow for lunches and individual tastes.
- Slightly cool food before placing it in the freezer.
- Thaw the item in the refrigerator or microwave (not on the counter, which can cause illness) or double the cooking time if you put the item in the oven still frozen.
- Since freezing dries foods, add a little broth, milk, water, or whatever liquid the dish contains to help moisten it when re-heating.

"For best results, try to use frozen meals within six to eight weeks," suggests Deborah Taylor-Hough, author of *Frozen Assets: How to Cook for a Day and Eat for a Month*. "To prevent overcooking, or that warmed-over taste, slightly undercook foods to be reheated after freezing."

PRE-COOKING SAVES TIME

In addition to freezing entire dishes in advance, cooking and freezing some ingredients in advance is a great timesaver. Angie Best-Boss of Anderson, Indiana, remembers, "What I did that worked best? I cooked 10 pounds of chicken breasts (some I seasoned with teriyaki, others plain, others lemon-pepper, etc.) and froze them in meal-sized packages." After her baby was born, she used the chicken in casseroles, pasta dishes, tacos, and soups. Stir-fries are another alternative.

Lisa Sanders of Warrenton, Virginia, recommends browning and freezing ground beef. "It works in so many recipes and can be used so many ways. It's cheap and easy, and it saves a lot of time when it's already browned." She used it in spaghetti sauce, mixed with salsa, mixed with barbecue sauce, baked into refrigerated biscuit dough, in chili, and in shepherd's pie (mixed with vegetables and topped with instant or frozen mashed potatoes). This can also be used to make sloppy joes, tacos, and with Hamburger Helper™.

Another timesaver is to flash-freeze meat. Lay the patties, chops, or pieces on a baking sheet and freeze for 10 minutes. Place the pieces in a freezer bag and store in the freezer. The pieces won't stick together, and you can remove as many pieces as you need at a time.

Rice can also be cooked in advance and frozen, then eaten with stews, in soups, with stir-fries, or as a side dish.

CHEAT SHEETS

A few lists will make meal preparation a snap after the baby arrives. "Sit down and plan a month's worth of super-fast, super-easy foods," suggests mom Angie Best-Boss. "It felt so good to come home from the hospital and know I didn't have to agonize over what was for dinner." Post your list of planned meals on the refrigerator and cross them off as you eat them.

Create another list or notebook with fast recipes and list the necessary ingredients with instructions. This will assist dad or anyone else who is lending a hand and also will ensure that your meals will be healthful and prepared the way you prefer.

Registered dietician Stacey Norris advises you to keep track of foods and essentials that need to be replaced as you run out. This will make it easy to ask relatives or friends to bring supplies when they visit or for dad to stop at a store after work.

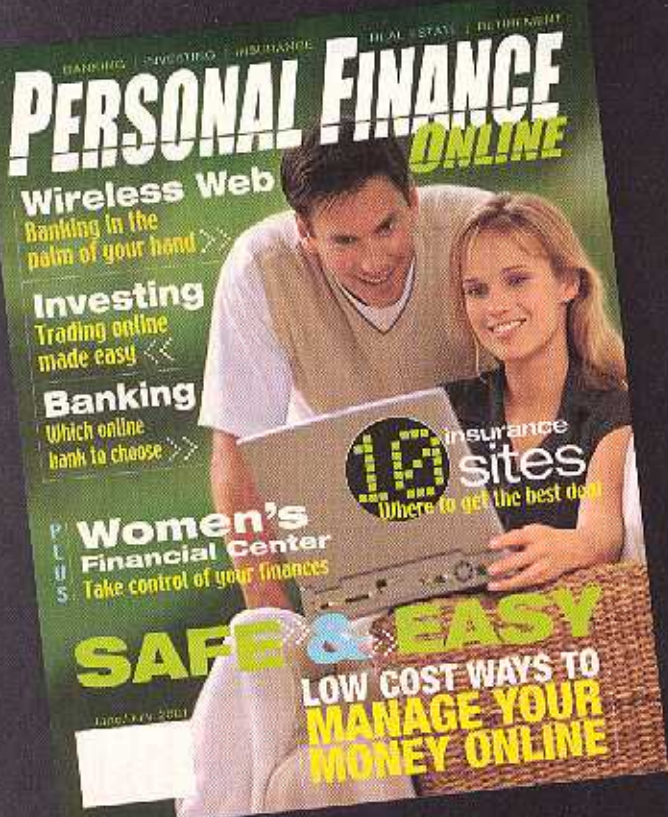
THE VALUE OF DISPOSABLES

You will be pressed for time, so buy some disposable/recyclable freezer storage containers and the new freezer-to-oven disposable pans. Cleanup will be a snap because you can toss them after use. Freezer zipper bags will also make life easier, and disposable cups, plates, napkins, and eating utensils are lifesavers when you are tired.

A LUXURY

When you are adjusting to an infant, cooking can seem like a luxury you don't have time for. A little planning goes a long way, and after birth, the meals you prepared and froze in advance will seem almost as miraculous as your new baby!

About the author: Brette McWhorter Sember is a former attorney and the author of five self-help law books. She lives in western New York State with her husband and two children. □



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