

MEAL PREP

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Introduction

When you're trying to lose weight, one of the greatest favors you can do for yourself is plan ahead — especially in the kitchen. Keeping track of your intake, controlling portion sizes and prepping well-balanced meals helps you create a calorie deficit and make healthy eating a habit.

In fact, people who meal plan tend to eat more nutritious foods and a greater variety of them compared to those that don't, according to a recent study in the International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity.

While meal prep doesn't have to be daunting, there are some things you should keep in mind to reap the benefits. Here, experts weigh in on five common mistakes and share strategies for fixing them:

Size is Important

"Accurate portion sizes are key, so make sure your container size reflects them," says Micah Siva, RD, chef, and founder of NutritionXKitchen. "If your containers are too big, you might be tempted to fill them, and as a result, overeat at each meal." Conversely, "if they're too small, you may be tempted to eat extra snacks, sides or meals, which can negatively impact the number of calories you consume during the day."

The fix: Look for containers that fit standard portion sizes. For example, look for smaller single-ounce size containers for salad dressing or snacks like nuts. For meal-worthy salads, Siva recommends buying 30-ounce containers. You can also make portioning each component of your meal easier (and avoid wilted salads), by looking for containers that come with dividers.

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Keep it Simple

It can be easy to get overwhelmed with meal prep if you're walking into the grocery store with too many lists, trying to make elaborate recipes and doing too much at once.

The fix: Take advantage of supermarket shortcuts: "Don't be afraid to buy pre-cut veggies or already-marinated meat," suggests Presicci. Then, opt for meals with minimal hands-on time, like recipes you can make in a slow cooker.

Another pro trick: Fill a sheet pan and batch-roast a tray of different veggies. "Then, liven them up with different sauces like pesto or tahini and your favorite lean proteins," says Siva.

Spread Over the Week

While it might be tempting to get it all done in one day, food safety rules say you're better off preparing foods a few times a week (Think: Sunday morning and Wednesday evenings, for instance). Spreading meal prep time ensures you don't cook too much — and end up overeating to avoid wasting food.

The fix: "I typically suggest prepping 3–4 days' worth of meals," says Siva. "Not only do most foods keep fresh for that length of time, but it also gives you flexibility." Leave room in your meal plan for leftovers, too. For example, you can repurpose last night's dinner as omelets and tacos for breakfast and sandwiches for lunch.

Another common mistake RDs see is "prepping food that's not balanced, meaning you're leaving out critical macronutrients," says Presicci.

The fix: Getting portion sizes down is key. Aim to include 4–6 ounces of protein (i.e., a palm-sized portion of chicken, fish or tempeh), 1–2 cups of non-starchy vegetables (i.e., two handfuls of cauliflower, broccoli or salad greens), half a cup of starchy vegetables or carbs (a fist-sized portion of beans, sweet potatoes or whole grains), plus 1–2 tablespoons of healthy fats (one full dinner spoon of olive oil or avocado oil), says Siva. "Stick to this template, and you'll ensure that you stay full and see results."

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Think About Snacks

“Meal planning isn’t just about lunch or dinner. It should also include preparing snacks to keep you fueled,” says Siva. “Healthy snacks can help with weight loss by managing your hunger levels and reducing the possibility of overeating at your next meal.”

The fix: “Opt for snacks that contain protein and fiber, which helps fill you up and stabilize blood sugar levels (key for keeping your energy up and avoiding the office candy jar),” explains Siva. Some smart choices include hummus and veggies, apple slices with peanut butter or crackers and cheese. But stick to snack-sized portions — a good rule is to go by your thumb size: 2–3 for hummus, 2 for cheese and 1 for peanut butter, says Siva.