MEAL MAGIC FOR ONE…OR TWO

Newlyweds, couples without children, young adults in their first apartment, empty nesters, and those who have lost a spouse, are examples of households where meals for one or two are daily occurrences. Yet cooking in small quantities can pose special problems and, as a result, many rely on less nutritious convenience foods, substitute snacking for balanced meals, or otherwise eat poorly because it seems like too much effort to cook at home.

Not all recipes can easily be reduced. Ingredient proportions may not divide evenly, and herbs and spices often need altering to achieve the same flavoring in the smaller recipe as is found in the full recipe. Oven temperatures and cooking times also need adjusting to accommodate a smaller quantity. When microwaving, for example, half as much food as the original recipe will often take more than half the original cooking time.

Cooking for one or two does not have to mean a diet of leftovers. With a bit of planning, small quantity cooking can be easy and nutritious. Here are a few tips to show you how:

Equip the kitchen wisely. Successful small-quantity cooking requires the right utensils. A small amount of food will not cook properly if spread thinly in a large casserole dish. Look for 6”x6” square or 6” round baking pans for cakes and breads; soufflé, au gratin dishes, or ramekins for baked fruit or vegetable dishes; and 5”x7”x1 1/2” casserole dishes for entrees. A 6 or 8 inch nonstick skillet is useful for stovetop entrees and stir-fries. Lastly, choose 2-cup oven-to-freezer dishes with lids for storing extra portions that reheat conveniently.

Cook once and eat twice – but without monotony. Roasted chicken, beef or pork can be eaten at one meal and additional amounts frozen in individual portions for later use. Mixing the thawed meat with vegetables and/or pasta can create a skillet dinner, soup, stew or chili.

Freeze foods in single serving portions. Leftovers can be portioned into freezer-safe plastic bags or containers for a later reheat. Raw meats such as poultry parts can be wrapped individually prior to freezing so that only the desired number of pieces can be removed when needed without sawing or pounding to separate parts. Ground meat can also be individually
portioned prior to wrapping then frozen. Ground meat patties can be formed prior to freezing, then either wrapped individually with plastic wrap or stacked with a layer of wax paper between each patty for easy separation. Sliced bread freezes well and individual slices can be removed for mealtime and quickly thawed in the microwave or, covered, on the countertop.

**Buy frozen vegetables in one pound plastic bags.** Cook only what you need, seal the bag with a twist tie, and return unused portions to the freezer for later use. This is easier than trying to divide and measure a solid block of vegetables. Try mixing several different vegetables for a medley.

**Keep an assortment of pastas on hand.** This is a quick-cooking staple that can be used as an entrée topped with sauce, a side dish mixed with vegetables, or incorporated into a soup or casserole. Extra pasta can be cooked and stored, covered, in the refrigerator for later use in a lunchtime pasta salad with vegetables and a low fat dressing.

**Explore your grocery store!** Fresh produce can be bought by the piece as can bakery items such as bagels and rolls. Salad bars offer an array of prepared fruits and vegetables that can be purchased in customer-specific quantities. The deli can supply small amounts of sliced meats and cheeses while half-pint containers of milk can be found in the dairy case. Many single-serving shelf and frozen products are now available in the supermarket. While these products may save you time, remember to carefully read nutritional labels. Give attention to total fat, saturated fat, cholesterol and sodium contents, which are often high in such processed foods. Don’t sacrifice good nutrition for convenience.

**Explore your bookstore!** Many new cookbooks are available that feature healthy, one or two serving recipes. Investing in a cookbook today can mean better eating and better health for many tomorrows to come. Here are two recipes to get you started:

**APPLESAUCE-OATMEAL MUFFINS**

1/2 cup all-purpose flour  
1 teaspoon baking powder  
1/8 teaspoon salt  
1/4 cup quick-cooking oats, uncooked  
3 tablespoons brown sugar  
1/4 teaspoon ground cinnamon  
1/4 cup skim milk  
2 tablespoons unsweetened applesauce  
1 1/2 teaspoons vegetable oil  
1 small egg OR egg white  
Vegetable cooking spray

Combine first 6 ingredients in a medium bowl; make a well in center of mixture. Combine milk, applesauce, oil and egg/white; add to well in dry ingredients. Stir just until dry ingredients are moistened.
Spray 4 muffin pan cups with vegetable spray. Spoon batter into cups, filling each 3/4 full. Bake at 400° for 18-20 minutes or until golden. Remove from pan immediately. Makes 4 muffins.

BROCCOLI CASSEROLE

1 1/2 cups coarsely chopped broccoli, fresh or frozen
3 tablespoons canned 99% fat free cream of mushroom soup, undiluted
2 tablespoons (1/2 ounce) shredded reduced-fat sharp Cheddar cheese
2 tablespoons chopped onion
2 tablespoons nonfat mayonnaise
1/2 teaspoon lemon juice
1/8 teaspoon ground thyme
1/8 teaspoon ground pepper
Vegetable cooking spray
2 tablespoons crumbled low-fat cheese crackers (about 10 crackers)

Place broccoli in steamer over boiling water. Cover and steam until crisp tender (about 3-5 minutes). Combine soup and next 6 ingredients, stirring well. Stir in broccoli. Spoon mixture into a 10 ounce baking dish that has been coated with vegetable spray. Sprinkle with cracker crumbs. Bake, uncovered, at 350° for 30 minutes.

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