



PREPARATION

Meals for 1 or 2

no. 9.351*by P. Kendall and J. Anderson¹*

Quick Facts...

Cooking Meals for 1 or 2 can be easy and enjoyable.

Keep a variety of your favorite foods on hand to prepare meals and snacks.

Build your meals using the Food Guide Pyramid.

Refrigerate leftovers within two hours.

Create pleasant settings for dining at home.

If you're eating by yourself tonight, you're not alone. You're part of a growing trend. Each evening many Americans eat alone. Whether you're an adult heating up a cup of soup or a child microwaving a hot dog, solitary dining has its pitfalls. Several studies have shown that the diets of people who regularly dine alone come up short on important nutrients.

For many, cooking for one or two seems like too much work. Often recipes serve at least four. Bulk foods may be economical but not necessarily interesting over time. Perishable foods may be difficult to keep on hand without wasting them. Mealtime can be lonely. Plus, cooking inherently means doing dishes.

The good news is that preparing meals for one or two can be easy — and enjoyable — by planning ahead and making meals simple. Plus, many manufacturers now cater to the single diner with pre-packaged individual serving foods to help you create well-balanced meals.

Plan Ahead

The easiest way to prepare a meal for one or two is to plan ahead. It's hard to make a meal if you don't have any or all of the ingredients. Keep a variety of staple foods on hand — especially those foods you enjoy eating — so you are ready when it's time to cook a meal.

Sometimes foods are cheaper if you buy them in bulk. If you buy more than you can eat in a safe and reasonable amount of time, freeze the foods. If you don't like chopping vegetables or don't expect to use a whole head of lettuce before it spoils, purchase prepackaged salad greens or select just the salad ingredients you need from the salad bar section of your supermarket, if available. Or shop with a friend and split the perishable foods. Plan leftovers, so all you have to do is re-heat and eat. Make a pan of lasagna or enchiladas. Bake a casserole. Cook a pot of chili, soup or beans when you have time. Package them in small individual bags or containers and freeze the servings for later, when you may not have as much time or don't feel like preparing something.

Balance your Meals

The Food Guide Pyramid (see Figure 1) serves as a useful guide for making daily food choices and building balanced meals. See Figure 2 for suggestions on how to plan a meal using this tool. Start at the base of the pyramid with the bread, cereal, rice, and pasta group and work your way to the top. For example start with breads, rice, or pasta then add one or more vegetables, one or more dairy products, and a meat or protein source. Complete the meal with a fresh fruit or fruit juice. If possible, offer a variety of choices from all food groups. And finally, if you want, add small amounts of fats, oils,



Figure 1: USDA Food Guide Pyramid: A Guide to Daily Food Choices

or sugars to add more flavor. Soups and soup mixes are other alternatives for adding flavor.

Using this concept as a framework, for example a tuna sandwich with a few slices of cheese, lettuce (or salad mix), and tomatoes, along with an apple, contains all the food groups. A few baby carrots or pre-packaged carrot sticks on the side would help boost your vegetable intake too — helping add more vitamins, minerals, and fiber to your diet. Another option, for a hot meal, consider a plate of cooked pasta with spaghetti sauce, grated Parmesan cheese, and cooked lean ground beef. Complemented with a side of canned peaches or dried apricots, this meal has selections from all the food groups. Add fresh tomatoes, onions, green peppers or mushrooms to the sauce for more flavor and vegetables. You could build a similar meal using tortillas or rice in place of pasta, along with your favorite vegetables and fruits, and meat, beans or eggs with yogurt or a glass of milk.

Once you become a seasoned pro, start experimenting with different herbs and spices. Still, sometimes you might want to take a shortcut in preparing a meal by using a pre-packaged alternative. If this appeals to you, try pre-packaged convenience foods and fresh foods. For example, serve a frozen meat entree with fresh or frozen vegetables and fresh fruit. The fresh fruits and vegetables help balance out the higher fat and sodium that may be in the frozen entree.

If you decide to dine out alone, find restaurants that serve family style meals to groups of customers seated at the same table. You may end up not eating alone after all! If you're a senior citizen, check out senior chuckwagons and community meal programs. They're a great place to socialize and get a nutritious meal that's easy on the budget.

Reducing Recipes

Table 1: Reducing Recipes

Half of a Recipe	
<i>When the recipe calls for</i>	<i>Use</i>
1/4 cup	2 tablespoons
1/3 cup	2 tablespoons + 2 teaspoons
1/2 cup	1/4 cup
2/3 cup	1/3 cup
3/4 cup	6 tablespoons
1 tablespoon	1 1/2 teaspoon
1 teaspoon	1/2 teaspoon
1/2 teaspoon	1/4 teaspoon

Third of a Recipe	
1/4 cup	1 tablespoon + 1 teaspoon
1/3 cup	1 tablespoon + 2 1/3 teaspoons
1/2 cup	2 tablespoons + 2 teaspoons

Most recipes can be cut in half or in thirds. For easy references, see Table 1. Some ingredients are difficult to divide, such as an egg. If the recipe you want to cut in half calls for a large egg, try using a small egg or just the egg white. In some cases, it may be easier to make the entire recipe and freeze the rest for later.

Store Food Safely

A meal isn't complete until all leftover food is stored safely. Make sure you have food storage containers — such as thick plastic bags or shallow plastic containers — to store any leftovers safely in the refrigerator or freezer. Leftovers should be refrigerated within two hours.

Make Mealtime Enjoyable

Finally, now that you have created a meal, try to create a pleasant setting for dining at home. Listen to relaxing music, choose a pleasant location, or set

the table — even if it's just for you. An attractive placemat, flowers and candles help make a meal important, even if your company is yourself and the evening news on television.

Suggested Resources for Menus for 1 or 2

Cooking Solo: Menus and Recipes for One or Two that Follow the Dietary Guidelines to Lower Cancer Risk, American Institute for Cancer Research Information Series Part III.

Betty Crocker – Cooking for 1 or 2.

<http://www.busycooks.about.com>

<http://www.mealsforyou.com>

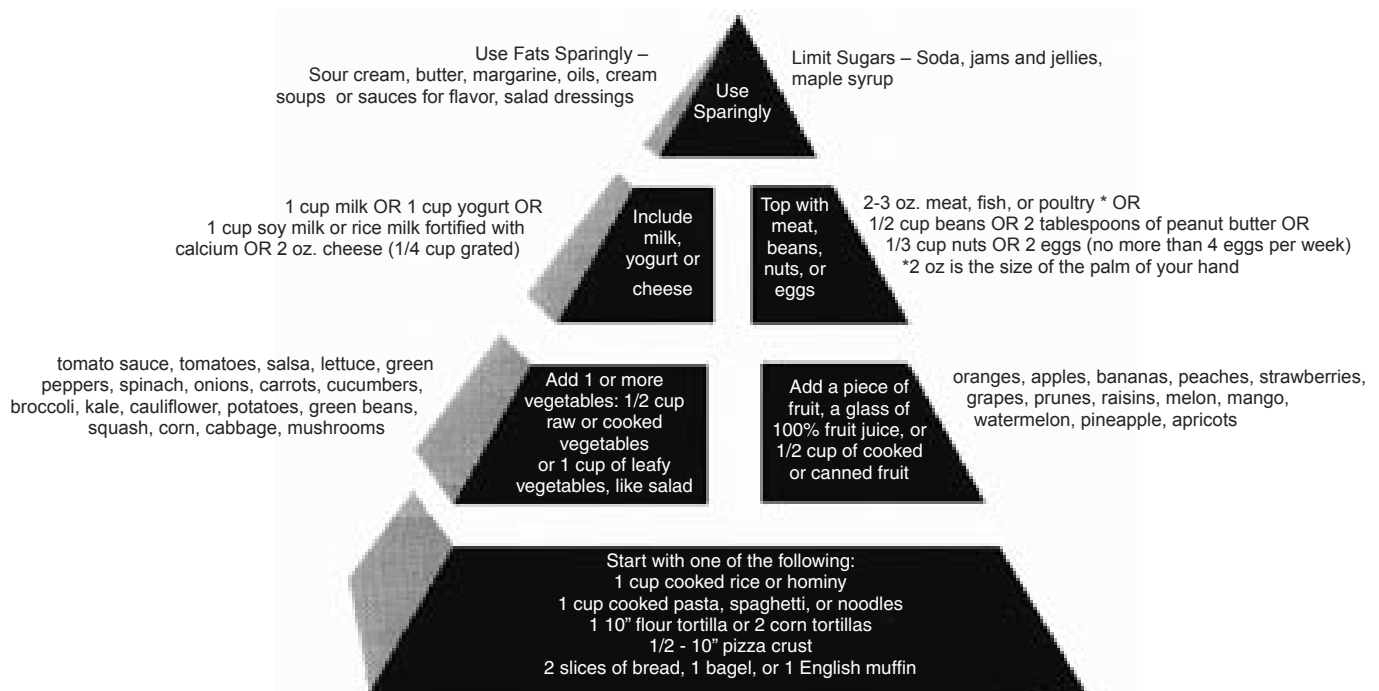


Figure 2: Building a Meal Using the Food Guide Pyramid

(Based on a 1600 kcal diet assuming 3 meals a day. Quantities may vary depending on your energy needs.)

For More Information:

- 9.306, A guide for daily food choices;
- 9.310, Food storage and quality;
- 9.329, Ingredient substitutions.