We've all had those days; it's 6pm and we're still wondering what to cook for dinner! On those nights, we either end up eating out, late or unhealthy. Over the years, I have found that meal planning saves time, money, reduces food waste, and even helps share some meal preparation responsibilities with others at home. This project can be tackled with several variations. A month of meals would be one idea, especially if your family really likes variety. Or, just planning for the week ahead might be best for your family’s schedule. Jazz things up with nightly themes each week like; meatless Monday, taco (or Mexican cuisine) Tuesday, and other nights like pizza, slow cooker or previously prepared freezer meal (double batch a meal like enchiladas, meatballs or lasagna and freeze), leftovers buffet, grill night, or new recipe night. The internet is a wonderful source for finding new recipes, and can be especially helpful if you have a lot of one ingredient you need to use up to avoid wasting it.

Cooking a portion of your meal ahead for planned leftovers, such as making extra grilled chicken to be used in quesadillas or a lettuce/ spinach salad topped with chopped grilled chicken, can be helpful to get dinner on the table quickly. I have also found it useful to make a list of main dishes my family likes and use this as a reference when planning.

As you are planning, shop your pantry first and consider what you can make out of what you have. Sometimes, this can help put off a trip to the store for a few more days. Remember to eat a variety of foods and plan for a balanced, nutritious meal of protein, dairy, fruit, grains and vegetables. Eating appropriate portions and filling up on the less expensive fruits and veggies versus extra portions of the often more expensive protein will also stretch your food dollars. Once you plan your meals, make your grocery list.

Recent stay-at-home orders have allowed for learning more ingredient substitutions, rather than running to the store for one or two ingredients, and for those who impulse purchase, continuing or trying online grocery ordering may also save you time and money. We should all be practicing social distancing, so waiting to go to the store until you have several items on your list continues to be important.

If you do go into the store, stick with the list! Take some time to figure out where the mark downs are in your store and make a quick stop there. Look for lean meats and fresh produce, which can be quick meals. I recently snagged marked down beef steaks and bagged chopped salad with dressing to which I added a bit more romaine lettuce and then a fruit, making a meal for around $3/person using adult serving sizes. And it was on the table quicker than take out!

More information on meal planning, food storage, understanding food product dates and even composting can be found in a new K-State Research and Extension Publication Working Together to Reduce Food Waste, available at https://bookstore.ksre.ksu.edu/pubs/MF3482.pdf. For more information, please contact Renae, Family Resource Management and Wellness Agent at 785-263-2001 EXT 3 or renaer@ksu.edu.