



## Freezer Cooking for One

People hate seeing their hard earned money slip through their fingers. If it's not putting gasoline in their vehicle, the money slips quickly out of their bank account at the grocery store. Everyone wants to save money, especially when it comes to groceries, and even if you live alone it's no different. One way to save on the grocery bill is to buy in bulk, but if you only cook for one, that's not always feasible. There is one great way to take advantage of buying in bulk, and save on your grocery bill – Freezer Cooking.

Freezer cooking is a fantastic way to save money at the store, and save time later on in the month. If you purchase in bulk, prepare the meals, and freeze the leftover portions. You'll then be way ahead of the game when it's time to eat. Another benefit to storing meals in the freezer for later use is that you'll have meals to share for ministry to others. Or if you have surprise-company you'll always have something quick and ready.

What exactly is freezer cooking and how do you take advantage of it? Freezer cooking, also known as “feeding your freezer” or “once-a-month” cooking, is a process where you plan your meals, purchase the food, and prepare the meals with the intention of placing the majority of them into the freezer for later use. This method, although time consuming at the beginning of the process, is a wonderful way to save yourself time and money throughout the month.

### Begin by planning

If this is your first attempt at feeding your freezer, you will probably want to start out slowly and work up to creating a month's worth of meals. In fact, you will probably want to start with just meats, unless of course, you're a vegetarian. When you shop for meat for tacos, plan to buy enough that you can cook it all at once and then save some for later. When you cook the meat however, don't season it for a particular type of meal, but season it in a generic way instead. That way, you're not stuck with five pounds of meat for tacos, but will have enough for spaghetti, burritos, or chili.

Another meat that's generally on sale quite often is chicken, in one form or another. If you can find chicken breast on sale in a family pack, take advantage of the savings and plan on using them for baked chicken, chicken fajitas, and chicken salad. The variety of meals you can prepare from chicken breast is almost limitless. Of course, the same type of variety would also be available with turkey breast, as well, if you can find that on sale.

To begin the process of cooking for one you need to have a plan. It's been said that if you fail to plan, you plan to fail. So, always begin the process with a written plan. What will the plan include? A list of meals that you enjoy, an ingredient list, and a shopping list is really all you need. Plan your meals either one week, two weeks, or even a month, in advance so you can get the best deals at the store. Write the meals on the calendar so you know which items to take out of the freezer before you head off for your day.

## **Make your list and check it twice**

After you have a list of meals that you'd like to prepare, you'll know the items needed for each recipe. Check your pantry to see which of those items you already have on hand. If you need something to complete a meal, start your grocery list and include everything that you will need for each recipe that you have planned. This one activity will make your shopping trip a huge success. Not only will you save money by being able to purchase the things on your list, it might help you keep from buying those unplanned items.

## **Head to the store**

You have your meal plan, you've made your grocery list, and you've checked it to make sure it includes everything you'll need. Now it's time to head to the store. If you were able to set up your list according to the layout of your favorite store, you should be able to get through it with little effort and time. However, not all stores are laid out the same, so it might take you a little longer than you would prefer.



It's best to head to the store for your major grocery shopping after you've had a good breakfast. This will help you avoid picking up things because you're hungry and will give you the energy you need to make it through the store. Another benefit to shopping earlier in the day is that this is when there are mark downs on items in the meat department. You could shave a good bit off of your grocery bill by shopping for your meats after they've marked the prices down. Since not all stores have the same schedule, it's a good idea to check with your favorite store to see when they mark items down. Besides the meat department, you may also find bakery items on sale.

## **Choose sizes wisely**

While you don't want to buy the largest sizes available, your list should provide you with all the information you need to choose just enough for the meals you're going to prepare. If you'd like to pick up some extra items – canned goods or other non-perishables – that would be fine, but it's not necessary since you know exactly what you're going to prepare for a set period of time. Choose the right amount of each item on your list so that you can cook the meal and allow yourself leftovers to keep in the freezer.

Don't forget to buy some zip-top freezer bags, plastic freezer containers, and small disposable aluminum bread pans. You'll also need a permanent marker to write the name of the meal and a date on the outside. If you would like to make the finished meals better able to handle being in the freezer, you might consider getting one of the machines that vacuum seals the meals prior to freezing them. They might be expensive to start with, but it should quickly pay for itself.

## **Time to get cooking**

You've made it home with all of the groceries you need to make your freezer meals. It's best if you prepare any fresh vegetables by cleaning them and cutting them up to the size you'll



need for each meal. Cut up onions and garlic for any meals that require them. Most foods will freeze well – breads, fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds, and meats – but for the best quality, you should freeze the foods after they've been freshly prepared. This will ensure that your meals will taste fresh when they are reheated.

If you planned a nice meatloaf, mix it up as if you were going to feed four to six people. However, instead of placing the meatloaf in a large bread pan, use a couple of the small, disposable aluminum pans. Besides being just the right size, you can take them right from the freezer and put them into the oven. You can either freeze them prior to cooking or after they've been cooked. When it's time to preheat, just pop them back into the oven and then enjoy. If that size is too large for a serving, you might consider scooping an ice cream server full into a muffin tin and then freezing them. After they're frozen, remove the meatloaf from the tin and place into freezer bags.

Soup stocks can also be made ahead of time and frozen. You won't need a lot of stock if you're only using it for flavor. Place the prepared stock in ice cube trays and allow it to freeze. After the cubes are completely frozen, remove them and put them into a freezer zip-top bag. By freezing the stock in the ice cube trays, you use the number that you think you'll need for the flavoring you desire. The rest can be kept in the freezer until needed.

Of course, you won't want to prepare everything to be frozen. Parts of the meals are easy enough to cook fresh the day you plan on having them. For instance, you probably would want to fix mashed potatoes that day, or boil pasta while the frozen meals heat up in the microwave. A tossed salad is easy to fix with the pre-shredded lettuce, cut up a tomato, some cucumber, or whatever you like to put in your salads. Toss with a good quality dressing to compliment almost any meal.

### **Separate meals**

There are many ways to separate meals for freezing. There are compartmented freezer containers, zip-top freezer bags, freezer wrap that you can press and seal, and aluminum foil. What you don't want to do is use old margarine bowls and expect them to adequately protect your meal. Here are some things to remember when separating meals:

- Fill each freezer container with enough of your prepared meal before you set aside what you plan to eat for that week. This way, you can divvy up the portions to suit you, and make the servings equal in size.
- If you planned on having a casserole for lunch or dinner one day, don't cook the casserole before freezing it. While they may be okay, they aren't the best in the world. In fact, if you prepare the casserole as if you were going to cook it, you could freeze servings in the same small aluminum bread pans. Layer each ingredient as if it were a large casserole, cover them tightly, and then place them into the freezer.
- Make sure you use the correct type of container when freezing meals. You don't want to waste your hard work and money. Purchase a couple of the same size casserole dish that can be used for freezer meals. Line a casserole dish with enough aluminum foil to complete wrap around the casserole dish. Add your soup or stew, cover, and allow it to freeze. When the meal is frozen, remove the aluminum foil and wrap it tightly with the

aluminum foil. When it's time to reheat it, pop the meal back into the casserole dish, and bake as usual.

You could also invest in some good quality freezer bags for prepared and cooked ground hamburger. Store everything as flat as you can to maximize the amount of space you have in your freezer. There's also the freezer quality press and seal type wrap.

- After you've spent the better part of a weekend preparing your freezer meals, don't waste them. As you're placing each meal into the freezer, write it down on a list that you will keep on your freezer door, or another readily accessible location. This way, you can see which meals you've used and which ones you still have. You can also make notes on which meals you liked after they were reheated so that you can decide which ones to repeat the next time.

### **Label, label, label**

As you complete cooking each meal, put it into whatever container you're going to freeze it in. Make sure you label the package with the meal, heating instructions, and the date it was frozen. By labeling correctly, and immediately after you've packaged it, you'll avoid forgetting what was in the package and then tossing it because you can't remember how long it's been since it was frozen. You'll also be able to easily find the item you want when you want it.

Most freezer bags have a white area in which to label the contents, however if you're not using a freezer bag, what are your alternatives? If you have a computer, you could get some mailing labels and write the information on the mailing label. Make sure you tape it down, though, since the freezing process may cause the glue not to stick in the freezer for very long. There are also ready made labels just for freezing, but they may not be easy to find. Look around online or do a search for "freezer labels." You should come up with a number of manufacturers for labels that are specially made for use in the freezer.

### **Into the freezer they go**

If at all possible, freeze each item flat. Remove all the air possible before closing a bag to keep the meal from getting freezer burned. It might also be a good idea, if you have more than one week's worth of meals, to place one of each type of meal in a stack so that you'll have them planned by week. Then all you'll have to do is take the next meal off the top of the stack when you need it.

Make sure you use the meals in a reasonable amount of time. While it would not be unhealthy to use a meal up to a month after it was frozen, it would be best to use it as soon as possible. If you find that you've made too many meals, and you're not going to use them in a reasonable amount of time, consider giving some of them to other friends that are singles, or invite a couple of friends to help you empty your freezer.

### **Remember the plan**

You've made your first group of freezer meals, you've enjoyed the fruits of your hard work for whatever time you chose to prepare the meals, and now it's time to make a new plan.

Don't throw away the lists that you just used. You can use those lists again, or you can use parts of them, whatever best suits your needs.

Keep track of what you've done so you know what was successful and which things weren't quite so successful. You'll definitely want to mark on your calendar the meals that you liked best. Are there some meals that you really loved, and will want to make more of the next time? Are there some meals that you thought were okay, but you just didn't enjoy them as much? You don't have to make as many of that one meal if you don't like it. The choice is entirely up to you. You decide what you want to prepare, so choose what you like and will be most satisfied with.

Don't be afraid to try new recipes the next time you do freezer cooking. Keep an eye on your local newspaper's grocery store advertisements. You might find that if you only made one extra week's worth of meals, that you really could create more meals the next time. Also, there's nothing that says that you can't do your cooking every two weeks instead of every month, but make enough meals that you'll have them for an entire month each of those two weeks. You'll actually end up storing enough meals in your freezer that you won't have to go shopping every week, but you'll still be able to enjoy good food.

### **Foods you should not freeze**

There are some foods that can be frozen, but don't freeze well. For instance, if you're planning a soup or stew of some kind that has potatoes in it, it is better to prepare each component of the soup or stew and freeze the components separately. Potatoes, unless they are flash frozen for French fries or hash browns, really don't freeze well. In this case, it would be better to have a package of frozen mixed vegetables, a package of pre-cooked and seasoned meat, and a package with the stock. Empty the packages into a soup pot and after it has thawed, add some freshly peeled and cut up potatoes, then allow them to continue cooking until the potatoes are soft.

Other foods that don't freeze well includes gravies and sauces with wheat (they separate and are not easily reincorporated), fried foods (they taste stale), garlic and green peppers (unless you like yours really strong), salt and onions (lose their flavor), and artificial sweeteners (they are no longer effective after they've been frozen). Most fruits and vegetables, unless they are blanched first, also shouldn't be frozen. And, never freeze lettuce, tomatoes, celery, or any other high water content vegetable. They'll be limp and tasteless. Many dairy products don't freeze well including cream cheese, cottage cheese, mayonnaise, and custards.

### **Freezer cooking recipes**

Many recipes can be used for once-a-month cooking, or at least most components of the recipe can be frozen. In fact, you can create a freezer meal for any time of the day or night, and for almost every ethnic group. For breakfast you might want to try Freezer Breakfast Burritos. For lunch, why not try Vegetable Pasta Shells? For dinner, how about having Peach Glazed Chicken or Simple Salisbury Steaks? These recipes are easy, relatively quick to prepare, and have a great smell the first time you cook it and when they're taken from the freezer and prepared.



## Freezer Breakfast Burritos

### Ingredients

12 eggs	2 tablespoons butter
1 pound pork sausage, cooked and drained	½ cup chunky salsa
2 cups cheddar or pepper jack cheese	24 flour tortillas



### Preparation

In a large skillet, melt the butter. In a large bowl, beat the eggs and then add them to the skillet. Stir frequently until the eggs are scrambled. In a separate pan, cook the sausage. Add the sausage and salsa to the egg mixture and then combine.

Heat the tortillas as directed and then place ½ cup of the above mixture to each tortilla. Add some cheese and then roll it up to make a burrito. Roll and fold the burrito so that the ends are closed. Place on a cookie sheet and freeze until solid. Wrap each burrito in aluminum foil and then place them each into a zip-top bag.

To prepare the burrito, unwrap one or two and wrap them loosely with a microwave safe paper towel. Heat the burritos in the microwave for 1 to 3 minutes on high. They should be hot throughout and the cheese should be melted. You can also allow the burritos to thaw overnight in the refrigerator and then bake them in a 350 degree oven for 10-15 minutes. This recipe makes 24 burritos, so there should be enough for several days up to a week or two, depending on how often you eat them.

## Vegetable Pasta Shells

### Ingredients

24 uncooked jumbo pasta shells	1 – 10 ounce can vegetable broth
1 carrot, minced	1 potato, peeled and diced
1 onion, finely chopped	2 cups ricotta cheese
1 egg	½ cup grated Parmesan cheese
1 teaspoon dried Italian seasoning	1 – 28 ounce jar spaghetti sauce (your choice)

### Preparation

Cook the pasta according to the directions on the package. Rinse, drain, and allow them to cool so that you can handle them.

As the pasta is cooling, in a large sauce pan, pour in the vegetable broth and bring to a boil. Stir in the carrots, potatoes, and onions. Cook for three to five minutes. Drain the vegetables and add the three cheeses to the vegetables. Stir in the Italian seasoning and then combine well. If the shells are cool enough to handle, fill each shell with the cheese mixture.

At this point, you can either freeze the filled shells, placing them on a baking sheet and then placing them in freezer bags or you can continue to prepare the shells in a casserole dish.

Remember your plan to prepare meals in advance. If you complete the meal, the shells may be difficult to store after the sauce has been added.

If you choose to continue the process, pour  $\frac{1}{2}$  of the sauce on the bottom of a 9" x 13" casserole dish. Place the stuffed shells on the sauce, making sure to keep the shells in a single layer. Finish off by pouring the remaining sauce on the shells and then sprinkling on additional Parmesan cheese.

Prior to freezing, refrigerate the shells to bring down the core temperature. Wrap each shell in aluminum foil, and then place the shells into a zip-top freezer bag. Make sure you label the bag. They should be good for up to three months. For the entire casserole, thaw it in the refrigerator and the bake at 350 degrees for 35-50 minutes. If you froze the shells individually, remove the aluminum foil and microwave at 40% power until thawed, 2-4 minutes. Then finish them on 60% power for an additional 1-3 minutes. If you are baking them, place into a small casserole dish, cover with aluminum foil, and then bake at 350 degrees for 20-30 minutes. The shells should be hot and bubbly.

### Peach Glazed Chicken

$\frac{1}{2}$  cup Italian dressing  
2  $\frac{1}{2}$  to 3 pounds chicken pieces

2 teaspoons ground ginger (optional)  
 $\frac{1}{4}$  cup peach preserves

#### Preparation

Dump all ingredients into a one-gallon zip-top freezer bag. Massage the bag so that the ingredients mix and cover the chicken evenly. Separate the mixture into smaller, serving sized portions. Place those servings into freezer bags, remove as much air as possible, and then lay flat in the freezer to freeze.



To cook your chicken, thaw it in the refrigerator. Bake your serving in the oven at 375 degrees for 30-45 minutes or until the juices of the chicken run clear. You can also grill this, it would be awesome.

### Simple Salisbury Steaks

1 can of mushroom soup  
 $\frac{1}{3}$  cup of dry bread crumbs  
 $\frac{1}{4}$  cup finely chopped onion

1 pound of ground beef  
1 egg, beaten  
1  $\frac{1}{2}$  cups sliced, fresh mushrooms

In a large bowl, mix together  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the can of soup, the ground beef, bread crumbs, egg, and onion. Use your hands to incorporate the ingredients; don't be afraid to get them dirty. Divide the mixture into six equal parts and form them firmly into patties.

Cook in a skillet over medium heat, a few at a time, until patties are browned on both sides. Stir in the remaining soup and mushrooms. Put all of the patties into the skillet, reducing the heat to low, and cover. Simmer for 20 minutes or until they are done. Allow to cool and then place in freezer bags and lay flat. To cook, remove from bag and reheat.



Almost any recipe can be prepared and made into a meal for one. While you can cook one meal at a time, it's more cost effective and time effective to cook a larger meal and save some for a later date. That's the beauty of freezer cooking for one. Make your plan, cook your meals, and freeze some of each recipe. Then, if you're rushed for time, or just too tired to cook, you can pull a pre-prepared meal out of the freezer and enjoy the fruits of your labor.

The possibilities are endless. You can cook once a month, every week or less frequently, and have meals to last you quite a while. Not only will you have meals already prepared and ready to enjoy, by adding a tossed salad or a vegetable, you'll have spent little time and effort in the kitchen and will have variety and healthy meals available at your convenience.