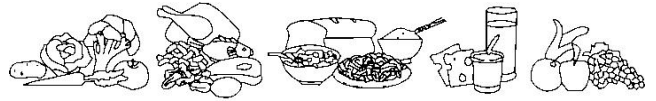


# Food \$ense



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## Homemade Skillet Meals! Low-Cost, Healthy & Easy



Looking for a fast, low cost and well balanced meal? Frozen skillet meals seem to be the answer. Is it possible to make a homemade meal that's even better?

Here are some reasons to make

a homemade skillet meal instead buying one in a store.

**Cost:** Meals range from \$6-\$10. The cost of making it yourself is similar but you can use ingredients that you already have on hand.

**Quantity:** One frozen skillet meal is usually 2 to 4 servings. For some families this would not be enough; if you have to purchase two meals or more ingredients, the cost really adds up. A homemade meal usually makes more servings because you choose how much to put into it.

**Protein:** frozen meals often have very little meat and the quality is not as good as your own meat choice.

**Fat and Salt:** Since all the ingredients are pre-packaged, you don't have the choice to use different seasonings or ingredients to lower fat and salt.

**Time:** Fixing a home-made skillet meal and a pre-packaged one can be comparable, about 15 – 20 minutes, if using pre-cooked meat options.

Source: "The NEBLINE"  
July 2008, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

### Create Your Own Skillet Meal

1. Choose at least one ingredient from each category.
2. If meat is not pre-cooked, you need to cook it first in the skillet, and then add additional ingredients. TIP: When buying chicken, beef, or pork, cook the entire package, cut up into bite size chunks and freeze extra portions.
3. Combine all chosen ingredients into a skillet containing 1-2 tablespoons olive oil.
4. Simmer over medium heat, stirring occasionally, for 20 minutes or until heated through.

PICK A GRAIN	PICK A VEGGIE	PICK A MEAT/BEANS	ADD A SAUCE
2-3 cups (measure uncooked), cooked: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Macaroni</li> <li>• Rigatoni</li> <li>• Similar pasta</li> </ul> 1 cup (measure uncooked), cooked: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Brown or white rice</li> </ul> 4 cups (measure uncooked), cooked: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wide or narrow noodles</li> </ul>	1 package (10 oz.) frozen (thawed and drained): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spinach</li> <li>• Broccoli</li> <li>• Green beans</li> <li>• Peas</li> <li>• Mixed vegetables</li> </ul> 1 can (14.5 oz.): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Green beans</li> <li>• Peas</li> <li>• Carrots</li> <li>• Corn</li> <li>• Mixed vegetables</li> </ul> 2 cups cooked fresh or one small can/jar: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mushrooms</li> </ul> 2 cups fresh (diced or sliced): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Zucchini</li> </ul>	2 cups diced, cooked: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chicken</li> <li>• Turkey</li> <li>• Ham</li> <li>• Beef</li> <li>• Pork</li> <li>• Ground beef</li> </ul> 2 cups, chopped: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hard-cooked egg</li> </ul> 2 cans (6-8 oz.) (drained and flaked): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fish or seafood</li> </ul> 2 cups: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cooked beans</li> </ul>	1 can (10.75 oz.) mixed with milk to make 2 cups: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low-sodium cream soup (mushroom, celery, broccoli cheese, etc.)</li> </ul> 1 can (16 oz.): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Whole, stewed or dices tomatoes with juice</li> </ul>

Season to taste with onion, garlic, celery, oregano, basil, salt or pepper.  
Top with shredded cheese, grated Parmesan or bread crumbs.

## Storing Leftovers Safely

Wondering what to do with those wonderful leftovers? Special care is needed to make sure leftover foods are safe to eat later. Remember: reheating will NOT make spoiled or unsafe food OK to eat.

- Cool leftover foods quickly in the refrigerator or freezer.



**Do not let food COOL on the stove or counter before putting it in the refrigerator.** Always follow the 2 hour rule: Don't allow perishable foods to sit on the counter for more than 2 hours!

- Divide large amounts of leftovers into small, shallow containers so food will cool faster.
- Place hot foods in shallow, open containers in the refrigerator to cool. Once cooled, cover food with a tight fitting lid.
- Always separate meat from stuffing or gravy for fast cooling. Cut large roasts in half before refrigerating.

Reheat leftovers thoroughly.

- Bring sauces, gravies and soups to a boil.
- Heat all leftovers until they are hot all the way through—not just warm enough to eat.
- If reheating in a microwave oven, cover the food with plastic wrap or a lid to hold steam around the food. Stir the food at least once during heating. Heat until bubbling.

Always eat leftovers in a day or two, or label the food and freeze for another day.

*Source: WNEP "Keeping Food Safe" 2005*



## How Much Does Convenience Cost?

Today's families are busy, and there are many options for putting a quick meal on the table: bake a pizza, open a box, or heat up a can. The frozen food aisle at your grocery store is loaded with "heat & eat" meals. They look tempting—but can we really afford them?

It's easy to find the price, but when you look at how much each package makes, it is harder to compare. Serving sizes vary from "1 cup" to "1/2 package." To really compare these, it helps to look at how much food is in each.

A frozen family-size dinner that is \$8.98 and has 7 1-cup servings costs \$1.28/cup. A single serving frozen entrée is about \$2.28, and has a bit more than one cup, so it costs \$2/cup. If you make an easy skillet meal yourself, that costs about 70¢/cup—you could save real money by making it yourself.

But you're too busy to cook? A home made skillet meal takes about 15-20 minutes to prepare...compare that to the "cooking" times of the other dinners and you'll see they take the same amount of time to make. You might decide to cook after all!

### Tuna & Pasta Cheddar Melt

- 1 can (14½ oz.) chicken broth
- 3 cups uncooked spiral pasta
- 1 can (10.75 oz.) cream of mushroom soup
- 1 cup milk
- 1-2 cups frozen or canned vegetables
- 1 can (6 oz.) tuna, drained
- 1 cup (4 oz.) shredded cheddar cheese

In large skillet, combine broth and ½ can water; bring to a boil. Add pasta and cook until just tender. Do not drain. Stir in soup, milk, tuna and vegetables. Top with cheese. Heat through. Let stand 5 minutes to thicken. Makes 6 servings.

*Adapted from Taste of Home Cooking School*

## Pass up the Salt!

Preparing foods from scratch instead of using pre-packaged convenience foods is a great way to cut down on sodium in your diet. Decreasing sodium intake is recommended to reduce the risk of high blood pressure. Keeping blood pressure in a normal range reduces the risk of coronary heart disease, stroke, congestive heart failure and kidney disease.

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends less than 2,300 milligrams (about 1 teaspoon of salt) of sodium per day. On average, most adults consume 4,000-6,000 milligrams of sodium daily. Processed and prepared foods are the main sources of sodium in the American diet: about 75 percent. This includes foods such as deli meats, canned foods, salty snacks, boxed and frozen meals.

Processed foods contain different levels of sodium. For example, a frozen dinner might vary from 550 to 1,300 milligrams of sodium. How do you know if a food has a lot of sodium or a little? Check the amount of sodium in one serving of a food using the Nutrition Facts on the label. If one serving contains 5 percent or less of the Daily Value (DV) for sodium, that's **LOW**. If it contains 20 percent or more, that's **HIGH**. Remember, if you eat "two" servings, you double your sodium intake.

To reduce sodium in your diet:

- Buy fresh, plain frozen, or canned "with no salt added" vegetables.
- Use fresh poultry, fish and lean meat, rather than canned or processed types
- Use herbs, spices and salt-free seasoning blends in cooking and at the table.
- Cook rice, pastas, and hot cereals without salt. Cut back on flavored rice, pasta and hot cereal mixes, which usually have added salt.
- Choose convenience foods that are lower in sodium. Cut back on frozen dinners, pizza, packaged mixes canned soups and broths. Make your own instead!



### *Dear Sue Keeney ...*

*Meet Sue Keeney--your source of research-based information about nutrition and health! Readers of all ages like Sue's practical tips on eating for good health, stretching the food dollar & more!*

*Dear Sue,*

*I find lots of recipes that include cooked chicken, but how do I buy cooked chicken at a price my food budget can afford?*

*Wanda Savee*

Dear Wanda,

You can purchase canned chicken. You'll find it near the tuna.

**But**, you'll save money and end up with a better quality product if you cook your own chicken for use in recipes.

Purchase inexpensive chicken parts; you don't need boneless breasts for this. In a large saucepot, place chicken along with some sliced onions, celery, and carrots. Add a little salt and pepper. Add enough hot water to cover the meat and heat to boiling.

Reduce heat to low; cover and simmer until chicken is fork tender—at least one hour, perhaps two.

Remove chicken from the liquid and cool quickly. Remove the meat from the bones and use it in recipes.

Try cooking 4 to 5 pounds of chicken at one time and freezing the meat in amounts that you can use in favorite recipes.

*Sue*



**GOAL:** Choose a skillet meal from the chart on page one to try. Serve it with a fruit, and milk to drink, for a complete meal everyone will enjoy. Write your meal idea here:

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## Would You Like to Save \$\$\$\$?

The School Lunch and Breakfast Programs offer healthy meals to all children but families with low or moderate income may be eligible for free or reduced prices.

- Free/reduced meal prices makes your family food budget go further.
- The money you save can help you pay other bills, such as heat, rent and gas.
- Your school district receives extra funding for all students, based on the results of the forms submitted by parents.

You can apply anytime during the school year. Contact your school office, and don't miss out on this important resource for your family.

### Skillet Lasagna

½ lb. lean ground beef or turkey  
½ cup chopped onion  
1 jar/can spaghetti sauce, 28 oz      1½ cups water  
3 cups noodles, uncooked  
1 pound fresh or frozen spinach  
1 cup cottage cheese      ½ cup shredded mozzarella

1. Brown meat in skillet; drain and rinse.
2. Add onion, sauce, and water to meat in skillet; cover and bring to boil.
3. Add noodles, cover, simmer for 5 minutes.
4. Stir in spinach, cover, simmer for 5 minutes; stir again.
5. Spoon cottage cheese on top; sprinkle with mozzarella.
6. Cover and simmer for 10 minutes more. If mixture gets too dry, add a little water.

Serves 4-6. Source: *How Does Your Garden Grow, UW-Extension*

## Kitchen Safety for Kids

It's OK to have fun with your kids when you cook together. After all, that's what it's all about! But accidents can happen when:

- You are in a hurry.
- You're messy and not cleaning up spills.
- You are not paying attention to what you're doing.
- Kids are using machines they don't know how to operate.
- Kids are working in the kitchen without permission or supervision.

### Safe Skillet Cooking Checklist

- Open pan lids away from your face to protect it from steam that can burn you.
- Always use potholders when handling pots, skillets or pans.
- Turn all pot and pan handles toward the middle of the stove so they won't tip over accidentally.
- Do not leave cooking utensils, such as spoons, in a hot skillet or pan.

*Adapted from Six Easy Bites,  
4-H Foods literature*



WNEP education is supported by the USDA Food Stamp Program, UW-Extension and local partners. Food stamps can help provide a healthy diet. To find out more about food stamps, call 920.386.3760. To learn more about the Wisconsin Nutrition Education Program in Columbia or Dodge County, please contact:



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