



# The Workweek Lunch College Meal Prep Guide

Written by Talia Koren, founder of Workweek Lunch. September 2018

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# Different Ways To Meal Prep In College

## Snacks

Having quality, nutrient-packed snacks on hand at home and between classes will help you keep your energy levels up while running around campus or studying. When we reach for the easy, packaged foods (I used to snack on pop tarts) our energy levels can sometimes get all wonky, making it hard to concentrate or not feel tired.

You can use meal prep to JUST make snacks in advance if cooking full meals isn't currently an option. It will get you into the habit of prepping food when you do have access to a full kitchen and are able to cook, too. When you have healthy snacks on hand, you're much less likely to go for packaged, processed foods that potentially make you feel like crap! Keep reading for meal prep snack ideas.

## Just Breakfast

Are you someone that feels rushed at breakfast time or do you often skip it? Meal prepping breakfasts only can make it so much easier to start your day on the right foot. I've found that starting the day with a healthy meal helps me feel less tired in the morning and much more focused on whatever I'm doing. Meal prepping breakfasts can help you get more sleep since you won't have to cook anything and you'll always have a healthy option available to you on your way to class.

Breakfast is usually the easiest, fastest meal to pre. If you're too busy to cook all the meals every day or do a big prep on a weekend, you can at least have ONE home cooked meal every day. Then you'll feel less pressure or stress during the other meals. Finding ways to stress less is just another amazing health benefit of meal prep!

## Main Meals

If you have access to a full kitchen, fridge and pantry, you can probably try prepping more meals and reaping the benefits of having healthy food on hand for most meals! The more meals you prep, the less food you waste. You'll also find yourself visiting takeout places less often, saving more money, having more time to study and feel like a badass overall.

I started lightly prepping meals in my junior year of college (before I knew what meal prep even was) because I hated spending money on food I didn't even enjoy. I was no longer part of the dining hall plan and cooking seemed like the easiest option even though I was just as busy as any other college junior. I wasn't a good cook, (and once I started a small fire in my oven!) but at least I knew exactly what was in my food. My body, skin and credit card balanced out a lot after I started, and I never looked back.

*Plan like you would for normal meal prep, just maybe be a little more cautious of money and also needing a lot of tools/space/time to cook and store food. I also like to have a small amount of "classic" college meals on hand (mr. noodles, Mac and cheese) so I have a quick mean option but I feel more compelled to "save" them for when I "need" them so I don't eat them often. I usually end up eating them when I clean out my cupboards at the end of the year. - Katherine Q, University of Guelph*

# Time Hacks For College Meal Prep

Time is precious when you're balancing studying, a social life, sleep, class, Netflix and extra curriculars. So the hardest part about meal prep as a college student? Finding time to do it. Here are three hacks/tips/strategies to not just find the time, but make the time to make your health a priority.

*Be consistent. Treat cooking and meal prep like homework. Put it on your to-do list or in your planner. Don't prioritize studying or homework or partying over meal prep and grocery shopping. It will help you so much in the long run. And remember that spending money at the grocery store once a week is a lot cheaper in total compared to several small food purchases on your way to class every day. Also, keep it simple. Find foods that you like and stick with them. It doesn't need to be complicated.- Brooke B, University of Maine [@brookebailey4](#)*

## When To Shop, When To Cook

Grocery shopping and meal prep/cooking do NOT have to happen on the same day. Personally? I find splitting them up to be a lot easier (and less exhausting).

If you want to cut down on your grocery shopping time, make that list and stick to it. Figure out recipes before you go, write down the ingredients you need (your grocery list) and then hit the store. Too often, we grab random ingredients in the store and then come home without knowing what we're going to do with them. Having a plan/choosing recipes and making a list eliminates that issue!

To make grocery shopping even faster (and more relaxing), try to go at an off hour. You won't have to wait in long lines, take forever to find parking if you drive there, or deal with crowded aisles. Bring a friend to make it more fun, too.

Normally, the best times to go are weekday mornings, weekday afternoons and weekend nights (as a college student, I get that's probably not an option if you like going out!). I used to go before class in the middle of the week since I got lucky sometimes and had classes that didn't start until 11 am.

The day after you go shopping, find some time to at least start meal prepping a little bit. You don't have to do all the meals at once, remember that! If you only have time to prep snacks, breakfast or one batch meal - that's better than nothing and you'll be glad you did it.

If you're sharing a kitchen, do your best to coordinate with roommates to find good time to cook (when they're out or in class).

## The Art Of Multitasking

There are certain meals you can cook while doing other things. If you're someone that needs to spend the majority of their time outside of class studying, I suggest looking into meals that sit in the oven or stove (or instant pot/slow cooker) that can cook without needing constant attention.

I personally found it helpful to study and do homework in short bursts while cooking. Having a limited amount of time helped me focus and get more done. But that also could just be me!

If you can't wrap your head around taking less time to study and more time to cook, remember this: if you don't have to deal with ordering food online, going to the dining hall or going to a takeout place, then that gives you more time to study too. A few hours in the kitchen can save so much time during the week for what's more important!

## Don't Find Time! Make Time.

My last time tip: if you want to prioritize health and get cooking, it has to be written down in your schedule. Whether you use a digital calendar like me (Google Calendar is life) or a traditional planner/written calendar, it's got to be in there, or else it won't happen. Just like you wouldn't miss a class or meeting, this (and exercise if that's important to you) can be treated with the same care!

## Basic Cooking Equipment For College Students

It's hard to cook without your own equipment. Investing early on is smart because if you buy quality (as in, slightly better than IKEA) cooking utensils, they'll last you through college and then some. I'm still using some of the cutting boards and pans I had since college!

### For Dorms (Without A Full Kitchen)

- [Mini Fridge](#) (you can find cheap ones and they add an extra surface to small dorm spaces!)
- [4-6 Food containers](#)
- An ice pack and lunchbox
- [Electric kettle](#) (if it's allowed)
- [A French press](#) (if you're a coffee drinker and don't want to have to wait for the dining hall to open)
- A few mugs and small bowls (plates are overrated)
- Forks, spoons and knives
- [At least one good knife](#) for chopping - I recommend a chef's knife
- And a small [plastic](#) or [bamboo](#) cutting board

*The crockpot has helped me meal prep so much! I just drop all the ingredients for chili/curry/soups/Mac and cheese into the crockpot in the morning and when I come back from my busy day, dinner is served! Also storing portion sizes in fridge/freezer is great. I always have a protein bar in my backpack just in case I can't get a meal. Lastly, making fun/healthy food keeps meal prep enjoyable for me! - Alexa E, University of Florida, [@vegandopeinthecrockpot](#)*

### For Tiny, Shared Or Communal Kitchens

- [Instant pot](#) or [crock pot](#) (this can be stored in your room or in the kitchen if there's room)
- [4-6 Food containers](#)
- [Ice packs](#)
- [A lunchbox](#)
- [A French press](#) (if you're a coffee drinker and don't want to have to wait for the dining hall to open)
- [Kettle](#)
- Plates, mugs, bowls, forks and knives
- [A few good knives](#) (you really only need two or three)
- A small [plastic](#) or [bamboo](#) cutting board

- [One baking dish](#)
- [One small baking sheet](#)
- [One skillet](#) (if there's none that you can borrow)

Usually in dorms there's a communal microwave which makes life a lot easier. I know that every dorm is different, but we were able to store equipment in the communal kitchen and there was a large fridge there too. There was a stove and an oven (they weren't great) but it worked.

If you want to get serious about cooking, but have extremely limited space and equipment, then this is the time to make friends with someone that DOES have a kitchen with equipment. When there's a will there's a way! I used to go to a friends' house to cook sometimes and it was nice to be in a bigger kitchen even if it was a trek!

## The College Pantry Staple List

These are ingredients that are not perishable that every college student needs to make cooking and meal prep happen!

### DRY GOODS:

1. Rice - I like jasmine! It cooks fast
2. Beans and chickpeas
3. Pasta and noodles
4. Dry lentils
5. Canned tomatoes and canned tomato sauce
6. Canned soups (good in a pinch, but not great)
7. Oats
8. Cooking spray
9. Salt and pepper (plus other spices you like)
10. Olive or coconut oil (I prefer olive oil for higher heat cooking)
11. Nuts and seeds
12. Nut butter and jelly/jam

### FROZEN:

1. Mixed veggies
2. Mixed fruit (great for smoothies and oats)
3. Ground meat
4. Frozen ravioli or pasta you like (good in a pinch)
5. Veggie/meat burgers (my favorite go-to protein in a pinch)

### IF YOU HAVE A FRIDGE:

1. Soy sauce
2. Salsa
3. Salad dressing
4. Condiments: ketchup, mustard, sriracha, chili sauce, pesto
5. Hummus
6. Fresh garlic

# Easiest College Meal Ideas And Snacks

*Make your mornings even easier by meal prepping smoothies! It's also an easy way to use up things that are about to go out of date if you've purchased too much (like fruit and yogurt). Make a big batch of smoothies and freeze them in mason jars (not the big ones the medium sized ones). Take them out the night before and let them thaw in the fridge. In the morning you just grab & go! - Jaqueline G, University of Alberta [@jacbrie](#)*

## 15 Microwave Meals

These are meals that you only need the microwave to make! If there's a \* next to the recipe, that means it includes ingredients that you may need to buy prepared already (or take from the dining hall) such as cooked rice or cooked chicken breast.

- [Microwave mac and cheese](#)
- ["Baked" potato](#)
- [Scrambled eggs](#)
- [Steamed veggies](#)
- [Corn on the cob](#)
- [Chilaquiles in a mug](#)
- [Cauliflower mac and cheese](#)
- [Omelet in a mug](#)
- [How to cook ramen noodles in a microwave](#)
- [How to cook quinoa in a microwave](#)
- [Egg White, veggie and bagel sandwich](#)
- [Nachos!](#)
- [Pita pizza](#)
- [Brown rice, edamame and pineapple](#)
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## 10 One Pot/Pan Meals

These meals you only need to use one dish for!

- [One Pan Vegan Mexican Pasta Skillet](#)
- [Sweet Potato, Tomato And Kale Rice](#)
- [The Workweek Lunch Sweet Potato Skillet](#)
- [One-Pot Cheesy Mexican Lentils, Black Beans And Rice](#)
- [One-Pot Lentil Dahl And Rice](#)
- [One-Pan Italian Sausage And Veggies](#)
- [One-Pot Shrimp Alfredo](#)
- [20-Minute Turkey Chili](#)
- [One-Pot Vegan Chili](#)
- [One-Pot Vegan Minestrone](#)

## 11 Meals You Don't Need To Refrigerate

These meals you can keep at room temp OR in a cooler with an ice pack during the day.

- [Workweek Lunch Instant Noodles](#) - no cooler needed
- [Easy Pasta Salad](#) - no cooler needed
- [Workweek Lunch No-Reheat Pad Thai Bowls](#) - cooler recommended
- [The Go-To Burrito Bowl](#) - cooler recommended
- [Chickpea Salad Bento Box \(vegan\)](#) - no cooler needed
- [Copycat Starbucks Protein Bistro Box](#) - no cooler needed
- [Tomato And Cabbage Tabbouleh](#) - no cooler needed
- [Hummus Veggie Wraps](#) - no cooler needed
- [How To Make 3 Different No-Reheat Meals With The Same Ingredients](#)
- [15 Minute Quinoa And Black Bean Salad](#) - no cooler needed
- [No-Reheat Vegetarian Taco Salad](#) - no cooler needed

## 10 No-Cook Snacks

These are healthy alternatives to packaged snacks that you don't have to have to cook! Some may require a food processor/blender or toaster.

- [Cucumber-Feta Bites](#)
- [Salami Cream Cheese Roll Ups](#)
- [Turkey-Veggie Snack Wraps](#)
- [Smashed Chickpea Salad Toasts](#)
- [Granola Crunch Apple-Peanut Butter Sandwich Wrap](#)
- [Triple Almond Energy Balls](#)
- [Tapas Plate with Marinated Chickpeas](#)
- [Fruit and Cheese Kabobs](#)
- [Apple Sandwiches](#)
- [No-Bake Nut Free Granola Bars](#)

## 10 Class-Friendly Foods

These are meals that won't make a lot of noise or be super smelly in class.

- [Hummus Edamame Wrap](#)
- [Cherry Kale Salad](#)
- [Hummus-Stuffed Pitas](#)
- [Veggie Roll Sushi Roll with Creamy Sesame Wasabi Dressing \(Vegetarian\)](#)
- [Avocado Summer Rolls](#)
- [Sweet Potato Sandwich Wrap](#)
- [Black Bean Rice and Cilantro Salad](#)
- [Caprese Pasta Salad](#)
- [Greek Yogurt Chicken Salad Sandwich](#)
- [5 Mason Jar Salad Ideas](#)

*One of my favorite things to do in college was chicken salad - you could roast some chicken on a Sunday and mix it with celery, dried cherries, almonds, Dijon, salt, pepper, and just enough mayo to hold things together. Then, have it as a sandwich or inside celery boats or on triscuits - keeps for about 3 days and you just need to pop an ice pack in your lunch bag! - Aimee R, Ithaca College*

## 12 Healthier Versions Of Late Night Meals

Sometimes you want to eat the fun foods without going to the dining hall or ordering takeout. Here are the best ones to make at home (totally worth the hard work because you KNOW exactly what's in them and can control the portion size too!)

- [Loaded Vegetarian Nachos](#)
- [Quick And Easy Personal Pizza](#)
- [Loaded Vegetarian Tacos](#)
- [5 Different Kinds Of Veggie Fries](#)
- [Healthified Chocolate Milkshake](#)
- [3-Ingredient Mac And Cheese](#)
- [Quick Homemade Ramen](#)
- [Veggie Grilled Cheese](#)
- [Chocolate Banana Mug Cake](#)
- [Chocolate Chip Cookie In A Mug](#)
- [Cinnamon Roll Mug Cake](#)
- [Chocolate And Peanut Butter Banana Bites](#)

## 15 Freezer Meals

These are great meal preps to make in advance and place into the freezer in separate portions so you can easily reheat what you need as you go!

- [Freezer-Friendly Garden Vegetable Lasagna](#)
- [Easy Meatballs](#)
- [30-Minute Vegetarian Meatballs](#)
- [Freezer Chili \(Beef\)](#)
- [Veggie Freezer Chili](#)
- [Workweek Lunch Moroccan Chickpeas](#)
- [Workweek Lunch Tex Mex Mac And Cheese](#)
- [Workweek Lunch Butternut Squash Soup](#)
- [Hearty White Bean Vegetable Soup](#)
- [Broccoli Quinoa Casserole](#)
- [Blueberry Pancakes](#)
- [Workweek Lunch Red Lentil Coconut Curry](#)
- [Workweek Lunch Freezer-Friendly Egg Sandwiches](#)
- [Baked Eggplant Parmesan](#)
- [Loaded Vegetable Soup](#)



# Bonus Hacks And Tips For College Students

## How To Carry Meals Around All Day

If you're on the go and taking meals from class to class, I highly recommend investing in a lunch box/bag that either fits in your backpack OR you don't mind carrying around. If you find one that can fit a few containers (2-3, depending on the size) and is insulated, you're golden.

My favorite lunch bag is [this one from Lock and Lock](#). It comes with containers and it fits in my backpack and holds plenty of food and snacks for the day. It's also easy to clean and has a spot for an ice pack.

Speaking of ice packs, you'll need to grab 2-3 of those too to rotate through the week. And you'll want to have an extra one in the freezer at all times just in case you forget to freeze the one you used that day (happens to me ALL the time).

[Here's my recommendation for ice packs](#) (this comes in a set of 4) on Amazon.

You can ALWAYS grab disposable forks and knives from cafes around campus, or you can bring a set of your own. (I always lose mine, though). [Here's a nice, light portable set of cutlery](#) that is easy to wash.

*Buy a thermos for hot food! It saves you the hassle of trying to find a microwave on campus (or waiting in lines) and warm leftovers taste way better. Filling a thermos with hot water for ten minutes before you put food in it also goes a long way for keeping it hot. - Breanna S, UC Davis*

## Some other creative ideas for eating your own food on campus:

- Can you keep meals in your car if you have a car?
- Can you go home between classes?
- Do you have a friend on campus that would let you stash meals at their place (maybe if you make extra food for them too haha)
- Do you have an on campus job that has a mini fridge available to employees?

*I am often at school for 10-13 hours and this gets me through. I also don't get mad at myself if I get a grilled cheese from the caf for diner during a hard day, because university is hard enough as it is, no need for added struggle from ourselves. -Kate W, University of Alberta [@bredsonkate](#)*

## Dealing With The Dining Hall

If you're on the dining hall meal plan, this part is for you! Making healthy choices in the dining hall is hard, but not impossible. One thing I want you to keep in mind: **you won't have to deal with the dining hall forever**. So don't fret over it too much. It's only for a few years, and in the meantime you can educate yourself on what healthy looks like to you and work on basic cooking skills (where/when you can) in preparation for post-school life.

Here are some tips I have for you for navigating the dining hall:

- Hit that salad bar hard. If you struggle to find yummy options that are packed with veggies that you ENJOY, the salad bar is your friend. A side salad at lunch and dinner will ensure that you're at least eating SOME veggies on the reg, and that's really good for your digestion and all that fun stuff.
- You can always look at the menu online before you hit the dining hall to see what options are available. Planning in advance will always help you make better choices in the moment!
- Think carefully about WHO you go to the dining hall with. You may not want to constantly eat around people who make choices that seem unhealthy to you, or with people who comment on YOUR choices. Find judgement-free buddies to eat with and it will be a lot more enjoyable. It's really hard to not let social pressure affect your eating choices in the dining hall, so know that going in. Being aware of it helps a lot.
- Do not avoid desserts if you want them. The longer you try to restrict, the worse it will be if you binge. Seriously, a little bit of ice cream or a cookie every day is a lot healthier than a pint of ice cream or 10 cookies in one sitting (after restricting). Restricting foods is what causes binges, so keep that in mind. If you're someone with a sweet tooth, you can keep that in check by indulging a little bit every day. This mindset will help you feel more in control in the dining hall.
- Use the PROTEIN + VEG + STARCH template in the dining hall to create balanced meals that won't leave you hungry 30 minutes later (or put you in a food coma).

## What To Do With Extra Food

If you're cooking for yourself or meal prepping, you're bound to run into ingredient leftovers from time to time.

It's very important to leave some meals during the week open to use up these ingredients. I recommend having a rotation of easy, single-serving meals up your sleeve that you can easily throw these ingredients into like:

- Eggs! Scrambled eggs (or scrambled tofu) goes well with any leftover veggies. This takes about 10 minutes to make including chopping.
- Pizza! Keep some personal-size crusts on hand for easy leftover veggie/meat pizza, which takes about 15-20 minutes to make.
- Nachos! Got extra chips and cheese? It's time to throw those together with veggies and you've got baked nachos. This takes about 15 minutes to make.
- Stir fry! Great for extra noodles, veggies, eggs/meat. Throw in some soy sauce and you're good to go. This takes about 10 minutes to make depending on the noodles/rice.
- Burritos/Tacos! I love having an egg breakfast burrito with veggies for dinner.

When in doubt, throw everything together, dump some avocado or hot sauce on it and make a random (but delicious) bowl.

If you don't have time to cook anything but want to salvage some ingredients, you can also freeze them (pretty much anything can freeze well except tomatoes, radishes, cucumbers...) OR load 'em off on a friend who might want some extra groceries.

If you live with a bunch of people, I recommend having an “up for grabs” section of the fridge for leftover ingredients you’re not going to use up.

If you have to throw stuff away, that’s not the worst thing in the world. Having a plan (and buying groceries with the help of a meal plan) is always the number one way to avoid wasting food.

## 10 Food Budget Hacks For College Students

1. MEAL PREP! If you want to eat healthy without breaking the bank, batch cooking is ALWAYS the way to go (and it helps you avoid wasting ingredients!)
2. Use that college ID for discounts when you can!
3. If you have a dining hall plan AND a kitchen, bring a food container with you to the dining hall and pack it with rotisserie chicken, salad greens and other foods you might have a hard time buying at the grocery store. Obviously, if it’s against the rules, don’t do it... but I used to do this in college all the time!
4. If you go grocery shopping, research your shopping list online at your grocery store FIRST to see what brands are on sale in the store.
5. And if you go to a store that has a loyalty card, get it!
6. In a pinch, eat vegan. Vegan proteins (tofu, tempeh, beans, veggies) are almost ALWAYS cheaper than animal proteins depending on where you live. [You have access to all of my vegan recipes here.](#)
7. If you’re not into vegan food, grab a rotisserie chicken at the grocery store. You can pay around \$6 or \$8 for it and eat it many times through the week with veggies and starches.
8. Remember there’s nothing wrong with eating frozen and canned veggies if that’s cheaper for you (and it sometimes is!)
9. Learn how to make coffee at home and get a portable coffee cup. Buying it can really add up if you’re on a tight budget and a bag of coffee can last weeks (and only costs around \$5-\$10 depending on where you live/shop).
10. Buy generic brands (the store brand) of food instead of fancier or private label brands. For example, there are so many brands of granola but if you don’t want to make it yourself, buy the store brand instead.

## Additional info about this guide

**Have questions about college meal prep?** Reach out to Talia at [talia@workweeklunch.com](mailto:talia@workweeklunch.com) ANYTIME for questions (or shoot us a DM at @workweeklunch on Instagram).

**DISCLAIMER:** Talia Koren is not a dietician, nutritionist or trained health professional, she’s just an awesome home cook who has been through it herself. The advice and direction in this guide is meant to be general and supplemental.

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