

## Freezer Meals

After receiving numerous e-mails and posts asking how I do my freezer meals, I've decided to briefly post how I do them. I'm sure there are better explanations and solutions than what I'm listing, but this is what works for me.

### Why?

I LOVE cooking for a month at a time! Yes, it's one horrible day of cooking and dishes, but the rest of the month there are virtually no dishes or cooking to do and it's wonderful! Now that my children are in school and the only time that I can see them is after school, it's so nice to not have to worry about spending an hour or two cooking and doing dishes EVERY night. Instead, I spend the time with my children. In addition we have sports practices, church activities, etc. so it really cuts down on the stress and the time needed for dinner prep. When I get low on meals, I set aside an evening to go shopping and then a day that week to cook... all day (or most of the day.) It also cuts down on shopping trips or the length of the shopping trips during the month since my main dishes are already made. If you're going to go through all of the work to make a nice dish, you might as well make a little extra and freeze it.

### How?

I find 7 meals that we want a month and then we eat those 7 meals every week for 4 weeks (almost a month). Then the next month I choose 7 different meals and so on. Currently we have 4 frozen meals a week that are completely pre-made and ready to go in the oven, 2 meals that are partially pre-made and require a little preparation, and we have 1 meal a week that is a pizza day or going out to eat since we usually go on dates once a week. I don't have specific cookbooks just for freezer meals, but you can freeze almost anything. I've done a lot of Googling for recipes and have also found many in my own cookbooks. Some people say not to freeze food with sour cream or bread products... but I do and they all taste fine because I'm not trying to freeze them for long term use, just short term. I post a list on the fridge of what meals we are having that month and my kids enjoy crossing them off as we eat them. I swear by the Green Giant Steamables frozen veggies because I can throw the whole bag in the microwave without any preparation and they taste great, but fresh veggies are easy too. I buy enough for a whole month. We usually also have bread and some sort of fruit with the meal.

### What?

Freezer meals can be anything. Here are some that I've done: Chicken Cordon Bleu casserole, Chicken Divan casserole, Mexican Casserole, Chicken Enchiladas, Sicilian Casserole (meat and macaroni type of dish), Chicken Crescents, Tuna Burgers, Lasagna, Chicken Parmesan, etc. A regular casserole fills a 9X13 dish which lasts our family for 2 meals. So, with casseroles I can just double a recipe and then divide the ingredients

between four 9X9 square pans, therefore making 4 freezer meals. I also buy the foil disposable square casserole/ cake pans to freeze most of my meals in because they're easier to clean-up. I always do a few of the "nicer" meals in real casserole dishes in case we have company, but the disposable ones make clean-up so much easier and then if I volunteer to take dinner to someone I can give them a meal without them needing to return the dish. Frozen casseroles usually take an hour and a half or two to cook depending on the dish so you'll want to experiment with cooking times the first few times you try it. Some of the bready dishes like chicken crescents or tuna burgers only take 30 minutes to cook. I've tried putting the casseroles in the fridge the night before to let them thaw a little, but it didn't make that much of a difference in the cooking time so I don't do that anymore. I use Press N' Seal and then foil to cover the casseroles before I freeze them. Make sure the food is cooled down before you cover it.

Freezer meals that are partly frozen but require some preparation are: Taco Salad (cook and freeze meat), tacos (cook & freeze meat), white chili (cook chicken & onions and freeze, separate spices into a little Ziplock Bag and store for when cooking), chicken alfredo (cook & freeze chicken, or debone a small rotisserie chicken & freeze the meat), spaghetti (cook & freeze meat), baked chicken (pre-marinated and frozen, just unthaw in microwave and then bake), etc. Store meats or partially prepared items in Freezer Zip Lock Bags.

Sometimes I have 1 meal a week that is fast and easy in case I'm not home in time to stick a frozen dish in the oven. These are things like grilled cheese, nachos, chili, etc.

Sometimes I have 1 meal a week that will require complete preparation. These are things like 7-layer dip, steaks, etc.

Sometimes if I know I don't have an entire free day to cook during a week when it's time to do my monthly cooking, I'll plan a few ready made meals into the rotation: Chicken Alfredo in a bag, pot pies, frozen lasagna, etc.

You really can do any combination you want of freezer meals, partly prepared freezer meals, and other foods, it will just depend on what your month looks like and what you like to eat. I used to try to buy everything we needed for the month during the same shopping trip, including produce and milk, but things started to go bad at the end of the month. So, now when I shop for my monthly meals, I just buy everything I need to make my meals (only fresh veggies for the first week or two). I still go shopping once a week for milk, bread, fruit, and fresh veggies needed for the meals, but if you only want to go shopping once a month or once every 2 weeks you can use canned fruit or plan accordingly.

That's a very brief summary, but I hope it helps. I also recommend the following site for freezer meals; she has some good tips and recipes. <http://www.freezehappy.com/>