

Hello! You're listening to the Cook Smarts podcast. I'm Jess Dang the Founder of Cook Smarts and I'm here to help you become a more confident and organized cook in the kitchen.

This is our first episode, which I pre-recorded back in February because I'm currently out on maternity leave. Because of that I thought the perfect topic to start out with is How to Create Your Cooking Game Plan Before Baby Arrives but before we dive into this info-packed episode, a word from our sponsor.

Wait, that's me. Today's episode is brought to you by none other than Cook Smarts meal plan service. For just \$6 / month, you can get a new menu of simple, delicious dinners sent to your inbox every week. Get out of your dinner rut, save time and money, and waste a whole lot less food. Head to cooksmarts.com for 3 weeks of free meal plans. And now onto this week's episode.

Hi everyone, I am so unbelievably excited about today's episode. Not only is it our first but it's about a topic near and dear to my heart. As I record this, I'm 30 weeks pregnant with my 3rd kiddo. I have loved becoming a parent, but I understand firsthand that the transition into parenthood can be really tough. Those early days can be crazy, and I want to make it as stress-free as possible.

Over the years, so many parents have written me to tell me that figuring out what they're gonna feed themselves and then their kids later on is one of their biggest parenting challenges. They wished they had figured it out earlier and not while dealing with all the other demands that come with being a new parent.

None of this comes as a surprise since in all the getting ready to be a parent guides, they tell you about the stuff you need to buy but not the things you need to do to take care of yourself. But the truth is, surviving new parenthood is less about the physical stuff and much more about the mindset.

This first piece of advice I want to pass on is going to seem counterintuitive. It's the opposite of what most people will tell you, and it might even be a bit controversial. In preparing for parenthood, don't worry about the baby. Yes, you heard that right -- I'm telling you to not worry about what the baby needs. I know it is so fun to register for all the cute baby stuff and I don't want to deprive you of that because baby stuff is really cute but so long as you have diapers, a few onesies, a carseat, and a place for him / her to sleep, you're set. I promise you that Amazon can deliver all the other stuff later.

So in preparing for the transition into parenthood, I want you to know that it's much more important to worry about you and how you're going to take care of yourself because the truth is you don't know what kind of baby you're going to get until it comes. You might get a really great sleeper or you might get a baby who only sleeps when it's being held or rocked. Your friends will

tell you how challenging breastfeeding was for them or for their wives and partners, but it's just not something you get until you're dealing with a screaming baby at your breast.

Having a fussy baby, managing cracked nipples and wondering if your baby will ever latch are REAL problems. They are stressful problems. But you can't really prepare for them because you may not have them. They are unfortunately the problems that you just have to face when and if they happen in real time.

What you can prepare for is something that is always a constant -- you will need to eat and nourish yourself so you have the energy and strength to tackle the demands of raising a human being that can't do anything for him or herself yet. And if you're a mom who plans on breastfeeding, you will need to eat a lot, like constantly!

I experienced many of the same challenges that new parents face. Both Neko and Bowie had jaundice, which meant that it was critical that they were feeding well and eliminating their bilirubin levels through their poop -- if no one has warned you about this, there's gonna be a lot of poop talk. Unfortunately, it took a really long time for my milk to come in both times.

For my daughter Neko my husband went out and rented a special hospital grade pump, and I would pump every 2 hours even in the middle of the night to stimulate milk production. It was so frustrating because I would literally get 2 drops even though I was hooked up to this machine constantly. It took 2 whole milks for my milk to come in, but of course I still went through all the same breastfeeding pain and latching frustrations that so many women face. We visited lactation consultants. I bought every cream and product you could find on Amazon to lessen the pain. I just felt so physically awkward about all the changes my body was going through.

But in the midst of all this, one thing that I never stressed about was how am I going to feed myself? And since I was eating a lot both in volume and frequency, just eliminating the stress involved in that question made such a huge difference in our new parenthood experience. We were able to focus on these new immediate problems while still taking care of ourselves.

In today's episode, I want to help you do the same. I'm gonna tell you my 4 step game plan for getting a meal planning system in place **before** the baby comes, so that your sleep deprived brain has one less thing to worry about. And I promise you this system isn't just about making freezer meals.

But let's actually start there since I've already mentioned it.

Step 1 of the game plan is to make some freezer meals and I've got 4 tips for you here.

Tip 1 is don't just make huge casseroles of lasagna. Make a mix of things -- soups, chilis, patties and fritters, breakfast burritos, pancakes and waffles -- so you have a variety to choose from. So a little TMI here, one of the things I actually made were falafel patties because I was so nervous

about passing my first bowel movement post-birth and really wanted to make sure I had something with lots of fiber. Well, it totally worked. My GI system was back to normal right after birth, and I was very glad to have them on hand. If you're looking for freezer friendly recipes, we'll link to a collection of them in our show notes at cooksmarts.com/podcast/1. And if you're a meal plan service member, you can now easily filter meals in search with a variety of tags, and one of them is of course, freezer friendly.

Ok so tip 2 to freezer meals is to make components of a larger meal that are freezer-friendly. A good example would be to make a batch of pulled pork, which can then easily be turned that into a quick sandwich, quesadilla, taco, rice bowl, fried rice, scramble, or soup. Another good one is grains, which can sometimes take a little bit of time to cook. Meatballs can also be turned into lots of different things -- added to noodles or grains, sandwiched into a sub, topped onto a pizza, or used in a soup. Another suggestion is just chopping up chicken breast into smaller pieces and freezing in ½ or 1 lb portions so that you don't have to be chopping raw chicken while trying to hold a crying baby -- I promise you won't regret any of these small little head starts you've given yourself.

Tip 3, whether you're freezing a complete meal or just a component, portion it out so that you can defrost and cook up a few servings at a time. You might not want to be eating enchiladas for days, so just separate it and freeze smaller portions. Same goes for if someone give you a huge casserole -- take a minute to divide it up before freezing.

And the last tip is that you don't have to feel like you have to cook everything yourself. Feel free to take advantage of what you can buy at the store. I'm giving you permission to take all the shortcuts you need to maintain your sanity. For us, we always like to stock up on Gardein, those fake meat, products because my husband is a pescetarian, and I also really love them too. You'll just want to have more on hand since you'll be eating more meals from home than usual.

Now that we've covered freezer meals, let's move onto step 2 of the game plan. This one is a bit of work, but I know you can do it, and again you're not going to regret the effort you put in ahead of time.

I want you to sit down and create at least 2 weeks of meal plans filled with meals that 1) you can cook with no prepping or minimal prepping and 2) these are meals that you feel comfortable cooking already. And a bonus if these can be meals that can be eaten with 1 hand because there will be many times when that's all that's available to you. These will become your back pocket meals that you can whip up without consulting a recipe -- it's spaghetti and meatballs, it's tacos with store-bought salsa and pre-grated cheese, it's a simple omelet, it's Instant Ramen with baby spinach and other frozen vegetables added in. And if there are no meals that fall into this category for you, that's gonna be something you'll work on before the baby comes too.

I know that sounds really challenging to some of you -- cooking without consulting a recipe, but I think the reason that sounds scary is we're so used to having a recipe. They're our crutches in

the kitchen, sort of like our phone GPS. We've become so reliant on having GPS that we no longer spend time getting oriented with our surroundings. Same goes for a recipe. We often operate like robots on autopilot, and we don't take the time to understand the why of what we're doing in the kitchen. I just want you to spend the next few months being a bit more mindful while cooking, and you'll notice that it won't take much for you to commit a few recipes to memory.

So how will you use this list of meals? Once you get about 2 to 3 weeks of meals together, you'll put them into 2 or 3 weekly menus. List out the meals and the grocery list, and those menus will be your meal plan that you'll put on repeat until you're ready to get back into the kitchen in a more involved way. Doing this ahead of time means that when you're exhausted and wondering what you're going to feed yourself for the week, you're in luck because you already made a plan. Just pull one of these up with its grocery list. You can do the shopping or assign it to someone else.

Even when you're ready to jump back into the kitchen and try new things, some of these meals will be with you for the rest of your parenting life -- there are always going to be hectic nights, but my wish for you is that you're not gonna have to stress about dinners during that time because you can whip up one of these dinners like it's nothing. You can fill your new meal plans with 2 or 3 of these easy meals and add 1 or 2 new dishes, but remember to be in the habit of mindful recipe following so that you're continuing to commit new meals to muscle and mental memory. It'll just make you a much more efficient cook going forward.

Now onto step 3 of the game plan, which is all about planning out your snacks because you'll be snacking a lot. Your schedule during those first few months can be really unpredictable and you might not have time to sit down and actually eat a real meal 3 times a day. There's just gonna be a lot of grazing in between diaper changes and feedings. And if you're nursing, you're going to be starving all the time. It's amazing how hungry you get. I would literally eat a huge breakfast and feel like I hadn't eaten anything. So you're gonna need snacks to get you through the day, and just like with the meals, we're gonna plan ahead.

So I want you to make a list of snacks, and it should be long and varied. And they shouldn't just all be from one food group -- they should be a mix of carbs, protein, fat, and just indulgence.

Some ideas are fruits, nuts, olives, cheese, yogurts, muffins, quick breads, energy bars or bites, vegetable crudite, good chocolate, dried fruits, crackers, and chips. And of course you deserve all the dips for those things, like hummus, salsa, guacamole, and even tuna or egg salads. Jot this list down in an email, and send it to your partner and family, so they can be in charge of picking these items up.

These will not only be the snacks to nourish you during early parenthood, but they'll probably end up being the snacks you introduce to your kids when they get to the snacking stage of their life.

If you're looking for even more snack ideas, we have a blog post called [How to Stay Well Fed While Caring for a Newborn](#), and we'll link to it in the show notes. Again just go to cooksmarts.com/podcast/1

My last step -- step 4 -- in the game plan is something that everyone should do, whether they plan on having kids or not. If you've never taken a knife skills class, go and find one. You can do one online. We have a great free one called [7 Steps to Chopping Like a Pro](#) and again we'll link to it in the show notes for this episode at cooksmarts.com/podcast/1. Or find one in person. You can search on Google or Yelp, local knife skills class or local cooking school.

And you might be wondering now, Jess, I'm having a baby. How is getting a knife skills class going to help me take care of a baby? Well, it is! One day that baby is going to eat solid meals, and you're going to be the one in charge of feeding him or her for probably at least the first 13 years of their life and most meals do require some chopping.

If you learn how to use a knife efficiently and safely, you're gonna be able to save so much time in the kitchen, and time is something parents are in great shortage of. It'll make a huge difference in your kitchen confidence, and your kids will sense that as they grow up. If you make the kitchen seem like a fun, relaxing place, they'll view cooking in the same way. Plus, you'll be able to pass on these same knife skills to your kids too, and that's gonna give them a real sharp advantage (pun totally intended) in life.

So now that I've walked you through the 4 individual steps, let's combine them to make a true system for how you're gonna feed yourself during new parenthood and beyond.

Your freezer meals -- it really is up to you to decide how you want to use these. You can decide that you don't want to cook at all in those early days and just rely completely on freezer meals and not try to cook from your meal plans at all.

You might decide you want to be cooking from your meal plans earlier and use the freezer meals as one-off insurance. Or perhaps you even built your freezer meals into your meal planning. If you do find yourself going through your freezer meals quickly, I do recommend a replenishment at some point because unfortunately new parenthood is more of a marathon than a sprint. For lots of people, the real exhaustion might not hit you until a few months in after weeks of compounded sleep deprivation and you'll want some more backup freezer meals then.

If you're one of the lucky ones who has help from family and friends during this time, this is a great task to assign to them -- making a few more freezer meals for you.

As for the meal plans, ideally you've made them easy enough that they can be integrated into your new parent life relatively easily and early. And one thing I didn't mention when we were talking more specifically about that step is the use of takeout. Just like I gave you permission to buy any pre-prepared frozen food you need, plan for takeout within your meal plans too.

It's totally fine if those simple, easy meal plans may just include 3 or 4 homemade dinners a week and the rest of the time, you can rely on frozen food (homemade or not), leftovers, and takeout. I don't think any busy parent completely forgoes takeout. For me, it's just a lovely treat to have every few weeks, and if you want to rely on it more in the beginning, go for it. I had a lot of friends who aren't cooks or who didn't live near me who sent me gift certificates to food delivery companies operating in my area, and those were much appreciated gifts.

All of it is ok. And just like your baby will wean from breast milk or formula in a bottle or whatever you choose, you too will wean from some of these shortcuts or just need to rely on them less because you took some time to think ahead. Lots of our members take a complete sabbatical from our meal plan service when they first have a baby but most come back to it eventually because they had that system in place beforehand.

In all of these steps, what I want to give you with this entire game plan is a sense of control because that is something lacking for so many new parents as they figure out how to care for this baby who's completely on their own schedule. But by having some freezer meals, some sense of the things you can cook easily, a list of snacks that anyone can pick up for you, and feeling more confident with a knife. All of these steps give you more control. It's the stuff you CAN prepare for vs the stuff you can't. So when you do need to get takeout, it's not because you don't have other options or are totally stressed out and starving, it's because it's a choice you wanted to make. You have the freezer meals, you have a meal you could whip up without a recipe, you have hearty snacks, you have the knife skills to do it all quickly, but you simply are craving some hot greasy pizza.

Clearly preparing for and implementing these 4 steps is going to be a bit of work. If you don't think this system is going to work for you, pick something else. People always ask me, what's the best meal planning system. My answer always is, the one you'll use. If these 4 steps aren't for you, figure out something you will do because any preparation you do in this department is really about self-care. These are things you are going to do for yourself so that you have the energy and fortitude to care for your new little one because even though a lot will change, one thing that won't change is you will still need to eat multiple times a day.

And before you know it this self-care becomes family care as your baby transitions to solid meals, and meal planning will become even more important. I think that's definitely one of the hardest things I see parents go through -- the never ending question of what am I going to feed my family? If you get these 4 steps into place now and make them a natural part of your routine going forward, you're gonna be in a way better place, I promise.

The truth is, being a parent is not always easy but I hope that getting a system to feed yourself in the early months and then your family as it grows gives you more room to enjoy the good moments and feel way less stressed out about the to-do list.

With that, I conclude the inaugural Cook Smarts podcast episode. We're a brand new podcast, so please tell your friends and family about us. If anyone you know could benefit from what we talked about today, please share this episode with them. They actually don't even need to be an expecting parent -- these tips can be used by anyone who wants to get a better meal system in place.

Please leave a review on iTunes or wherever you listen to your podcasts. It really does help people find us. We'll do some fun prize drawings to give you an extra incentive.

And remember to head to cooksmarts.com/podcast/1 for the show notes and links mentioned in this episode. If you have comments and feedback about this episode, let us know there too!

Lastly, if you're not a member of our award winning meal plan service yet, head to cooksmarts.com where you can get access to 3 weeks of free meal plans!

Until next time, happy cooking from your kitchen cheerleader!