

How to Prepare Freezer Meals to Save Time During the Season

Struggling to get dinner on the table after a long day of shuttling athletes to and from practice? Or maybe you're frustrated with the small amounts of leftovers sitting uneaten in the fridge. Good news: Freezer meals might be just what you need to free up time and fridge space while still serving healthy, satisfying meals.

Here, [TrueSport Expert](#) Kristen Ziesmer, a registered dietitian and board-certified specialist in sports dietetics, walks through her best advice for creating freezer meals that are right for your busy family.

What is a freezer meal?

There are a few ways to approach freezer meals, which are essentially just pre-cooked meals or ingredients that you stick in the freezer to use at a later date. They can save you loads of time and speed up weeknight dinners, especially during busy seasons. The first approach Ziesmer likes is creating and freezing full meals, like pre-cooked stews or chilis that just need to be warmed up. Alternatively, [you can pre-combine raw ingredients](#), like chicken, vegetables, seasoning, and rice, together in a bag and put it in the freezer raw, to be later cooked in a slow cooker.

Ziesmer also freezes single ingredients, like pulled chicken, so that she can quickly create more versatile meal offerings. "A premade casserole or chili that has a protein and vegetables in it is a great way to get started with freezer meals," she says. "But single ingredients like shredded chicken are fun because they can be used in so many ways, whether that's in tacos, on pizza, with a loaded baked potato, or in a rice bowl."

Make your freezer meals alongside regular meals

Rather than devoting an entire day to making freezer meals, [simply make larger portions of meals you're already putting together](#). "If you're already making a meal for dinner, just double or triple your recipe and freeze a portion of it," Ziesmer says. "Anytime I'm making shredded chicken or pork, I know to make extra so that I can freeze it to use later."

Store meals properly

If you're new to freezing meals, a thick plastic Ziploc bag will suffice and you'll want to remove as much air as possible before you seal it. But if you're finding that freezer meals are a staple of your routine, Ziesmer recommends buying a vacuum-sealing tool that can create flat, airtight packs around your food. When freezing liquid meals like soups or chilis, Ziesmer suggests laying the bags flat on a baking sheet in the freezer so that the meals freeze flat and can be stacked.

There are reusable options for both vacuum-seal bags and basic freezer bags if you're on a tighter budget or trying to reduce kitchen waste. Ziesmer often uses her reusable silicone bags since they're dishwasher safe. If you use a lot of freezer meals, Ziesmer also suggests investing in a chest freezer. They're relatively inexpensive and offer a huge amount of

space. They're great for big families with hungry athletes, especially if you do a lot of bulk grocery shopping.

Don't leave meals in the freezer indefinitely

Ziesmer suggests not keeping freezer meals beyond six months. After that, especially if you're using a regular Ziplock bag, the food is likely to be freezer-burned and will have begun to pick up flavors from other food in the freezer—similar to if you've left ice cubes sitting in a tray in the freezer for months on end. Additionally, if you haven't reached for that meal in the last six months, there's likely a reason for that, whether it didn't turn out great or your family got tired of that dish. Set a reminder each month to check what's still sitting in the freezer and plan to use it or toss it.

A few of the best meals/ingredients to freeze

- **Chicken/Pork:** Shredded chicken or pork are some of the most versatile things to freeze, says Ziesmer. It's easy to do on the grill, in the oven, or with a smoker, and provides a perfect protein option that freezes well. She also suggests experimenting with different seasoning blends and flavor profiles.
- **Soups/Stews:** Soups and stews often taste better once the flavors have had time to blend, which makes them ideal options to freeze.
- **Chili:** Chili is another easy meal option that's easy to make in bulk and freeze for later. Blend a mix of beans, tomatoes, vegetables, protein, and seasoning. Chili can be served with bread or cornbread, over rice, or on its own.

A few of the worst meals/ingredients to freeze

- **Pasta:** Unless it's in a soup or stew, don't freeze pasta as it won't thaw well.
- **Potatoes:** Like pasta, potatoes will become crumbly when they thaw if they're not mixed into a soup or stew.
- **Dairy:** Any dish that has a cream sauce, a lot of cheese, or a yogurt base won't thaw properly, because the proteins in the dairy will change after freezing and thawing.
- **Vegetables:** Again, vegetables are great when mixed into a chili, soup or stew, but if you're hoping to have the vegetable on its own, it won't retain the crispness that the fresh version has (though if you want to freeze vegetables from the fridge that are starting to go limp, you can chop them up and combine them in one freezer bag to be used for a 'kitchen sink soup' at a later date).

Reheat right

A freezer meal can be delicious, or it can be a disaster, depending on how you elect to reheat it. Ideally, you're taking the meal out of the freezer the day before and moving it to

the refrigerator, so it has time to thaw slowly. This does take forethought and is where Ziesmer's weekly meal planning comes into play.

"I would not stick something in the microwave unless you're really pinched for time, and if you do that, make sure you're using a microwave-safe bag," she says. "But even then, you'll get hotspots through the food, and it won't taste as good. Instead, I like using the fridge to thaw it partially, then [transferring it to the slow cooker to heat](#) if it's a chili or stew, or using a pan on the stove for something like shredded chicken."

Don't forget to add fresh extras: Topping chili with some lettuce, pico de gallo, and avocado slices makes it feel less like a bowl from the freezer and more like a full dish. Fresh herbs on top of a stew can add flavor and micronutrients. And for athletes, it's important to add carbohydrates, like rice or pasta.

Start a swap

If you've perfected a freezer soup, but you know your friend is a whiz with chili, consider swapping freezer meals. We often talk about cookie swaps during the holidays, but why not swap freezer meals during busy parts of the season? This way, you can cook one dinner in bulk, freeze a few portions of it, and swap so that you end up with five different meals instead of multiples of the same thing. This is also a great way to get new recipes and let your kids try new dishes relatively risk-free.

Takeaway

Creating freezer meals can become an easy extension of your meal prep, and it provides a fast way to make healthy dinners when life gets busy. You can opt to make freeze entire meals in one container, or simply freeze single ingredients so that you can easily create different meal combinations.



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