The meal prep MYTH

Meal prepping without variety and planning could do more harm than good

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Trying to lose weight, save money, or just eat more home-cooked meals? Meal prepping is often the go-to solution. Social media makes it look easy — neat lunchboxes, quick recipes, and perfectly portioned meals.

Here's the thing, while meal prepping might look easy and aspirational, is it really something most people can stick with week after week? For some, yes. For others, not so much.

Meal prepping isn't just for 'gym bros' eating grilled chicken, steamed broccoli, and brown rice in bulk, it is about making diverse healthy choices to make your week less chaotic.

Without variety and balance, prepping the same meals over and over can lead to boredom, burnout, or even nutritional gaps. If it becomes more stressful than helpful, it may defeat the purpose entirely.

What meal prepping really means

Meal prepping, can be as simple as chopping vegetables, cooking extra portions of protein, or batch-preparing grains. According to Tara Schmidt, M.Ed., RDN and Lead Dietitian for

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the Mayo Clinic Diet in Rochester, Minnesota, meal prep can take many forms and doesn't have to be rigid.

"It's most sustainable for those who are well-organised, can carve out time during the week, and don't mind leftovers," she told *Gulf News*. "But it may not work for people who prefer spontaneity, dislike repeat meals, or live in households with varying food preferences."

The health factor: Is prepping always better?

If your goal is better health, does prepping ahead always help? Not necessarily. What matters more is the quality of the food you eat.

"High intake of ultra-processed food is associated with health risks," Schmidt explained. "Meal prep can help reduce reliance on fast food, but it's not the only way. Something as simple as oatmeal with blueberries, no prep needed can be just as effective."

The key is to lean into minimally processed, plant-based foods whether or not you are prepping.

One common concern is the lack of variety. Repeating the same meals can get boring and even lead to nutritional gaps over time. Schmidt advises rotating your ingredients:

"Aim for diversity within food groups — different proteins, vegetables, fruits, and grains. Use colour as a guide when shopping for produce to increase your vitamin, mineral, and antioxidant intake."

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How to build a balanced weekly plan — switch it up

Dr Giuseppe Bellucci, a functional nutrition and metabolism expert at Baldan Group, Dubai-based aesthetic and wellness centers, believes that successful meal prepping goes beyond a simple weekly menu. It requires thoughtful planning to ensure every meal is balanced, containing the right mix of macronutrients and essential vitamins.

Belluci recommends preparing two to three different meal combinations per week and rotating the types of protein, grains, and vegetables included.

"This helps prevent both nutrient deficiencies and palate fatigue. Meals should be complete, with complex carbohydrates such as whole grains, lean protein like fish, legumes or white meat, healthy fats from sources like olive oil or avocado, and a mix of fibre-rich vegetables and fruit in the right portions," he said.

To keep track, Bellucci suggests using meal planners or even colour-coded notes when assigning different proteins across the week. "Whether you prefer traditional meals with a separate first course and side dish, or one-bowl meals that combine everything, the goal is to maintain balance and variety over time."

The risks of poorly planned meal prep

Meal prepping is not foolproof. If you default to the same meals each week, you could end up with a lopsided diet too much of one food group and not enough of another.

"Common issues include excess protein (like too much chicken), too few vegetables, or micronutrient deficiencies in iron, B vitamins, or magnesium," Bellucci noted. This may lead to burnout, boredom, and falling back on fast food out of frustration.

Is it helpful for health conditions?

For people with specific health conditions like diabetes, PCOS, or high cholesterol, meal prepping can be particularly useful but only when it's well structured. Bellucci explains that proper meal prep allows for better portion control, ingredient selection, and calorie tracking, all of which are critical in managing chronic conditions.

"In diabetes, for example, the body's entire nutrient absorption system is altered. Controlled and consistent eating, as part of a well-designed meal plan, becomes a key element of lifestyle management alongside medications. Meal prepping helps maintain balance in blood sugar levels by preventing last-minute food decisions that often lead to poor choices."

A 2014 study in the Journal of Nurse Practitioners supports this, showing that individuals who consistently planned their meals tended to follow healthier diets than those who chose meals impulsively. When life gets hectic, many people fall back on convenience foods. Prepping in advance can help you avoid that trap.

Don't overlook food safety

One important but often overlooked part of meal prepping is food safety. Schmidt warns that meals stored in the fridge should be eaten within three to four days to avoid the risk of foodborne illness.

For anything intended to be eaten later, freezing is the safer option, though meals are generally best consumed within three to four months to maintain taste and texture.

Belluci also added it's also important to plan meals based on how long ingredients last. Use fresh produce and fish earlier in the week, and reserve more shelf-stable items for later.

In the end, meal prepping can be a valuable tool that works best when it's flexible, nutritionally balanced, and suited to your lifestyle.