As you're driving home from after a long day, you suddenly realize you need to figure out something for tonight's dinner. What will it be? You consider driving through your favorite fast-food restaurant for take-out, grabbing something from the deli or reaching into the freezer for a packaged entree you can zap in the microwave.

There is another option: Consider making a homemade dinner. I know what you're thinking: "I don't have time for that!" However, preparing meals at home offers many benefits. Consider the following possibilities:

You can improve your nutrition by increasing the amount of fiber, controlling the type and quantity of fat and limiting the amount of sugar and salt you add to your food when you make it yourself. Commercially prepared meals and other convenience foods are too often high in fat, salt and added sugar while low in fiber, vitamins and minerals.

The entire family benefits from eating together. Research has shown that children who eat with their families tend to make healthier choices. Meals don't always need to focus on kid-friendly foods like macaroni and cheese either. Offering new foods gives your child the opportunity to learn to eat a variety of foods.

Homemade meals need not always start from scratch. Use leftovers or "planned-overs." Use leftover chicken in pasta salads or quesadillas or roast a turkey breast in advance with the idea of using the turkey in several meals in different ways. Cook a large batch of rice or pasta on the weekend and use it in soups, salads and casseroles.

Preparing meals for your family at the end of a long day doesn't have to be a chore. Here's how you and your family can have the benefits of a home-prepared meal in a jiffy.

Start with a grocery list. Check your pantry and refrigerator to see what you need. If you match that up with grocery sale ads, you'll be saving money and time. If you develop the habit of keeping an active grocery list that you and other family members add to as you run out of necessary ingredients, it'll be a snap to have foods on hand that you can use for meal prep. Using a list also minimizes those quick trips to the store that often result in impulse buying. Not only can that be costly to your food budget, but multiple trips also cuts into your gas money and uses time that could be spend in other ways.

Use "speed-scratch" cooking techniques. Combine spaghetti sauce in a jar with cooked pasta, grated cheese, your favorite Italian spices and cooked lean ground meat for a tasty main dish. If you double the amount you make, you can freeze one dish for a later time. Another idea is to pick up a deli-roasted chicken and combine that with salad-in-a-bag and other fresh veggies from the produce department, fresh bread from the bakery and fresh fruit for dessert. You'll have a nutritious meal on the table in no time.
Slow cookers are gaining popularity once again. With many of us feeling pinched for time, toss meat, veggies and broth in the slow cooker the night before, refrigerate, and then slow-cook your meal through the day.

Source: Colorado Cooperative Extension

**Slow-Cooked Sirloin**

1 boneless beef sirloin steak (1 ½ pounds)
1 medium onion, cut into 1-inch chunks
1 medium green pepper, cut into 1 inch chunks
1 can (14 ½ ounces) reduced-sodium beef broth
1/4 cup Worcestershire sauce
1/4 teaspoon dill weed
1/4 teaspoon dried thyme
1/4 teaspoon pepper
      dash of crushed red pepper flakes
2 tablespoons cornstarch
2 tablespoons water

In a large non-stick skillet coated with nonstick spray, brown beef on both sides. Place onion and green pepper in a slow cooker. Top with beef.

Combine beef broth, Worcestershire sauce, dill, thyme, pepper and red pepper flakes. Pour over the beef. Cover and cook on high for 3-4 hours or until the meat reaches desired doneness and the vegetables are crisp-tender. Remove the beef and keep warm.

Combine cornstarch and water until smooth, gradually stir into cooking juices. Cover and cook about 30 minutes longer or until slightly thickened. Return beef to the slow cooker. Heat through. Yield: 6 servings