When it comes to cooking and preparing meals, more and more Americans are opting for convenience. Americans spend 47 percent of their food budget away from home, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Additionally, a report from an international marketing information company that specializes in providing insight into consumer purchasing and behavior showed changes in the last 20 years in the eating patterns in America:

- 92 percent of take-out lunches come from fast-food restaurants; and
- 92 percent of individuals consume some form of ready-to-eat foods in the home on a daily basis.

Today's consumer has chosen to eat out, take out and drive thru often for reasons linked to time and money. In our rush to get from here to there and fit in a meal, the unfortunate truth is that health too often is compromised. Making a mad dash through the supermarket's frozen food aisle isn't the best solution, either. Typically, convenience foods purchased as fast food or from the supermarket are high in salt and added sugar and fat but low in fiber, vitamins and minerals.

Interestingly, many real estate articles on selling a home indicate that, of all rooms in the home, the kitchen is the most important. Considered the heart of the home, kitchens see a lot of activity. In addition to the socialization that happens there, why not also make it a functional room and prepare healthful meals there for you and your family instead of eating food away from home? The immediate nutritional benefits are to:

- increase the amount of fiber and nutrient-rich ingredients,
- control the type and quantity of fat used,
- limit the amount of added sugar and salt, and
- adjust portion size to meet actual caloric needs.

Perhaps the best place to start is to get more organized. Use your fully functional kitchen equipped with a stovetop, oven, refrigerator, freezer and microwave.

Here are some guidelines to get you started:

- Bulk cooking. Set aside a convenient time for relaxed cooking, perhaps during the weekend or on a weekday evening. Double or triple a recipe and cook it in the oven or on the stovetop. Divide the finished item into individual serving-sized portions and freeze them. When time or energy for cooking is limited, defrost the right number of portions of your healthy, previously homemade meal in the microwave and serve.
- Special meal night. If you have small children you may enjoy “family night”. Homemade
pizza is fun because everyone can pitch in. Even little hands can sprinkle the cheese over the top. It also gives you a chance to choose healthy toppings like Canadian bacon instead of pepperoni, add more veggies and use half the cheese normally put on store-bought or restaurant pizzas. Plus, you get to spend time as a family.

* Make it ahead. Watch grocery sales ads to save time and money. For example, if you see that turkey breast is on sale, you can create several meals easily. While the turkey roasts in the oven, you can do other things. After it has cooled, slice some and place in freezer bags to serve as part of the main course for a future dinner. Dice some to be used in salads or casseroles. Freeze the carcass to toss in the crock pot on a cool day to make soup.

All of these ideas are simple as can be, but you do have to plan ahead. Take a few minutes to get that pencil and paper out now and start planning what you will have this week.

Source: Colorado Cooperative Extension

Pineapple Bacon Pizza
1 prebaked Italian bread shell crust (10 ounces)
½ cup sweet and sour sauce
3/4 cup unsweetened pineapple tidbits, drained
1 package (7 ounces) Canadian bacon, chopped
1 cup shredded reduced-fat Mexican cheese blend

Place the crust on an ungreased 14 inch pizza pan. Top with sauce, pineapple, bacon and cheese. Bake at 450 degrees for 8 - 12 minutes or until cheese is melted. Cut into wedges. Serve immediately.