

TIPS FOR DIET SUCCESS: MEAL PREP

By Erin Stern, author of *Train Like a Bodybuilder* and *Train Like a Bodybuilder at Home*

With so much conflicting information about “the best” diets, macros, and calorie counting, it’s easy to get bogged down in the details of figuring out what to eat and when. This causes a lot of people to abandon their meal prep efforts. Let’s simplify and go over five tips for meal prep success and as a bonus, I’d like to share a recipe from my upcoming book, *The Bodybuilder’s Meal Prep Cookbook*.

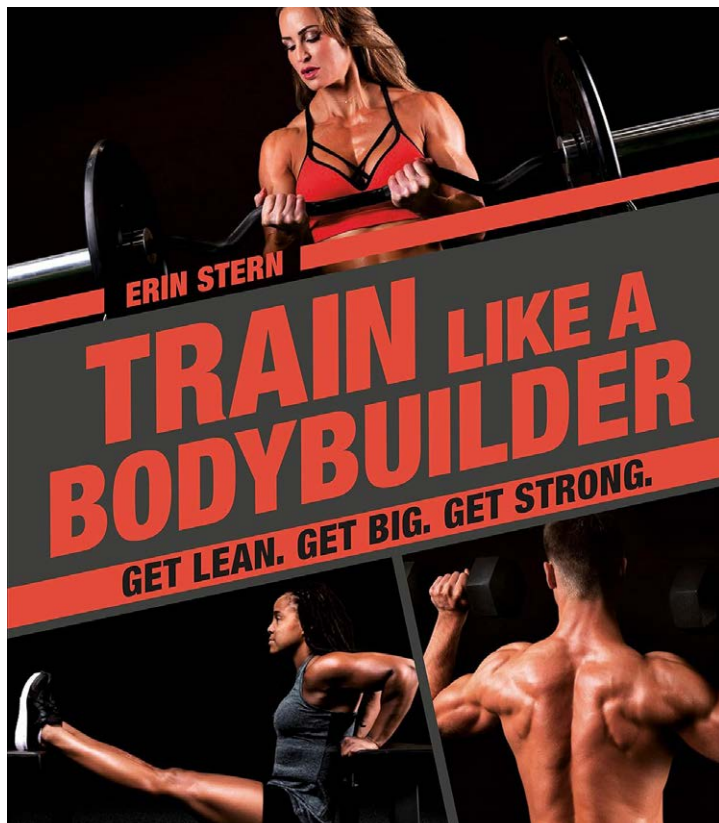
1. Prep Your Proteins

Lean meats are the foundation for a successful meal plan. Make sure you always have prepped and cooked lean meat in your fridge. I do this by cooking in bulk a couple of times per week. This also allows you to buy chicken, beef, fish, pork, eggs, or turkey in bulk.

Two easy ways to cook in bulk are baking and using the crock-pot. For example, slather 3 lbs. of chicken breast in Sriracha and bake it for 25 minutes at 400 F. Or, take 2lbs. of lean roast and place it in a crock-pot with bone broth. Top with rosemary, thyme, garlic, and salt. Cook for 8 hours on low.

I store cooked food in an airtight container and will put meals together as I need them. This tends to help the food stay fresher.

If you don’t care to cook, some stores, like Whole Foods, will cook the meat for you.



2. Focus on Timing and Macros

If you’ve ever used a meal planning app, you’ll realize a couple of things – you become much more aware of what you eat, and you become aware of how much time you spend inputting details into the app. The app also counts protein intake from grains and veggies, but this is not an optimal way to get protein. Unless your focus is on creating a complete amino acid profile, the 8g of protein you get from broccoli isn’t helping. If you’re counting veggie proteins in your overall protein intake, you may not be getting enough protein for muscle building.

I believe that some calories are “free.” For example, if you eat an entire bag of spinach, it’s 60 calories. But some of those calories are fiber. Your body also will expend energy to digest the spinach. So, those 60 calories have been used, thus making them “free.”

Shift focus to counting protein, starch and grain carbs, and fats. Your pre- and post-workout nutrition is the most important. This is where you need protein and fuel. Decrease carbs when you’re more sedentary. Always eat protein with every meal.

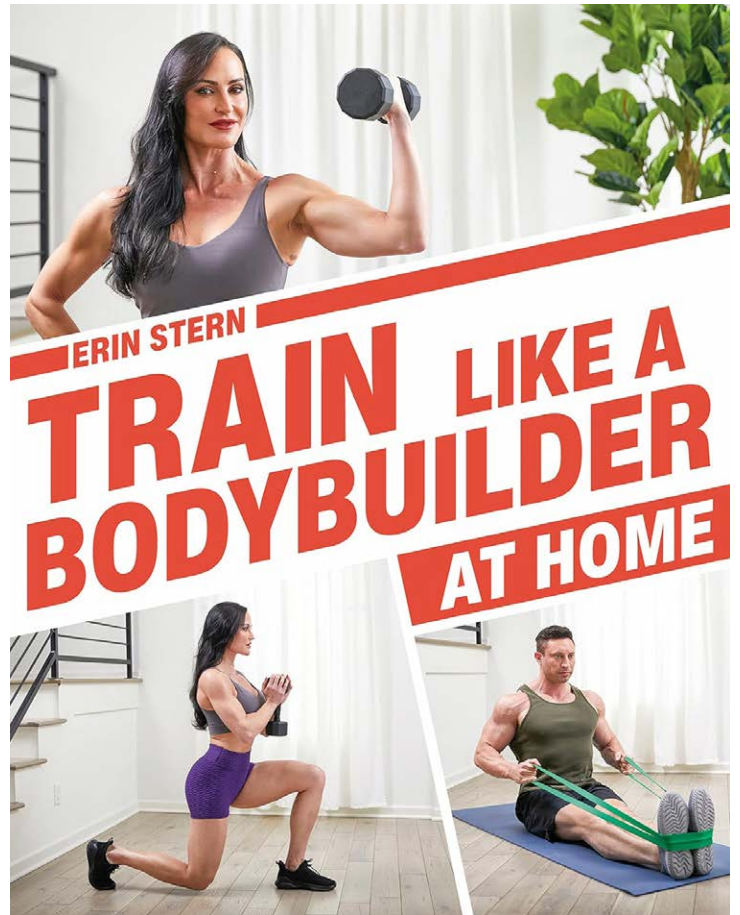
3. Have a Go-To for Dining Out

The average restaurant will serve up a few ounces of chicken or steak. If you're looking to gain or maintain muscle, you may need 2-3 times that (depending on height, weight, gender, and goals). I always ask for a double portion of meat. Know your "safe" choices at restaurants. You really can't go wrong with grilled lean meat, rice, and steamed vegetables. Grilled chicken or steak on a salad is great, too. If your dish comes with a sauce, request it on the side. Most restaurants do cook with butter or oil. I usually don't stress over this. But, if you're trying to be very strict, you can ask for the meat to be cooked "dry" or with less oil.

4. Cook, Portion, Freeze

Once a month, I'll cook full meals for prep. I will portion them into airtight containers and freeze them. This is a great long-term strategy, especially if you're forgetful or tend to get busy. Frozen meals will last 2-3 months. If you happen to run out of freshly prepped food, simply remove one of the meals from the freezer and allow it to thaw in the fridge for 12-24 hours. Reheat and you're in business!

This also works extremely well for traveling. TSA usually does not allow ice packs, so cooking and freezing your food is an effective way to keep it safe while traveling to your destination.



5. Have a Plan B

We're all human. We forget, have unforeseen work that comes up, or are simply in a place where we don't have access to our usual foods. I always have a plan B snack to help take the edge off. Shelf-stable snacks can help you avoid a vending machine splurge. Have protein bars, canned tuna/salmon, or protein powder and oats stashed somewhere. A snack will also prevent overeating when you do finally get your next meal.



SHEET PAN SMOKY CHICKEN WITH ROASTED VEGGIES

Spice up your meal prep with a variety of flavors contained within one sheet pan. Roasting the meal at a higher temperature yields tender and juicy chicken along with crispy, caramelized veggies. Be sure to dice your vegetables evenly, so they'll roast evenly.

YIELD: servings 8

SERVING SIZE: 4 ounces chicken, 1 cup veggies

PREP TIME: 15 minutes

COOK TIME: 20-25 minutes

INGREDIENTS

For the chicken:

2 lbs. chicken breasts

1 tsp. paprika

1 tsp. brown sugar substitute

¼ tsp. garlic powder

⅛ tsp. cayenne powder

½ tsp. salt

½ tsp. pepper

Nonstick cooking spray

For the veggies:

4 cups diced sweet potatoes

2 cups Brussels sprouts, halved

¾ tsp. salt

2 cloves garlic

DIRECTIONS

1. Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Line a large sheet pan with foil and spray with nonstick cooking spray. In a large bowl, combine paprika, brown sugar substitute, garlic powder, cayenne powder, salt, and pepper. Mix until well incorporated. Add chicken to the bowl, making sure to cover each piece with seasoning. Place seasoned chicken on the sheet pan, making sure to space chicken breasts out evenly.
2. Wash and scrub sweet potatoes and Brussels sprouts. Carefully dice sweet potatoes and place in a large bowl. Trim and slice Brussels sprouts lengthwise and place them in the bowl with the sweet potatoes. Dice garlic cloves and place them in the bowl with the veggies. Sprinkle with salt and hand toss to distribute evenly.
3. Place veggies on the sheet pan with the chicken and spread them out evenly. Lightly spray everything with nonstick cooking spray. Bake for 20-25 minutes, tossing the veggies halfway through cooking.



CHANGE IT UP

This recipe works well for turkey breasts instead of chicken. You can also use russet potatoes instead of sweet potatoes.

PREP TIP

Chicken stores and reheats well. Keep tightly covered in the fridge for up to 5 days. Depending on your caloric intake or for multiple people, this recipe can be doubled. Use two sheet pans and add a few minutes to the cooking time, if necessary.

NUTRITION (per serving): CALORIES 598 TOTAL FAT 13g TOTAL CARBOHYDRATE 64g PROTEIN 55g