

Casseroles - ready made meals



Diabetes
New Zealand

Preparing and cooking meals can become stressful at the end of a busy day. Even thinking about what to place on the table for hungry mouths can create unnecessary worry. It pays to be well prepared and plan meals ahead of time to ensure a balanced meal is available each night for you and your family.

It's a relief to unlock the front door and smell a delicious evening meal already cooking that can be served piping hot without any fuss. A casserole containing vegetables as well as meat can save a lot of time and you can eat it knowing you are receiving all the goodness recommended.

Preparing an extra large casserole saves time and effort, especially if half is left over for the following night. Crock-pots, slow cookers, or even setting your oven on automatic timer, can be lifesavers for busy people. Almost anything can be successfully cooked in a crock-pot, from a roast chicken to corned beef. You can create one-pot meals from the most basic items in your refrigerator or cupboard.

One of the advantages of casseroles is that they are generally better made with the cheaper cuts of meat, such as chuck or topside steak, or lamb neck chops and lamb shanks. Any chicken pieces are suitable for casseroles, but remove the skin and fat first. Lean pork with little or no visible fat also makes tender, tasty casseroles.

Fish is one of the few types of meat not ideally suited to casseroles. The soft flesh breaks up quickly and is best left for fast cooking methods such as grilling or baking.

Around 100-150 grams of meat is enough for one person, so use this amount as a guide to calculate the amount to buy for your household.

The key is to trim away any excess fat, skin and gristle before cooking. Cut the meat into even-sized pieces and coat in flour. Browning the meat in a frypan before cooking isn't necessary; you can get equally successful results when the meat is cooked without browning first.

A good flavour comes from having a good sauce. There is no need to add extra salt before cooking, as often the casserole will become more salty as the liquid evaporates and the sauce

thickens. If it still needs seasoning with salt then add this at the table, but do taste first to decide if extra salt is needed.

Often meat stocks are high in salt. A tomato-based sauce is a good addition to casseroles but beware of adding prepared cream-based sauces as they are higher in fat than vegetable-based sauces.

Fast cooking vegetables such as peas, broccoli, or mushrooms are best added towards the end of cooking to prevent them becoming mushy. However, most other vegetables can be added at the beginning, for example carrots, parsnips and onions.

Fruit added to casseroles makes a welcome surprise. Try chicken and pineapple, chicken and apricots, or beef and tamarillo. The choice is limited only by your imagination.

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The latest recommendation for people with diabetes is to increase fruit and vegetable intake to at least 3-4 serves of each per day. Adding fruit to meat dishes is a great way to work toward meeting this guideline. Remember that tinned, dried or frozen fruit can be counted

towards this recommended daily quantity.

Adding legumes or lentils to casseroles is a great way to make the meal go further, reducing the cost and adding extra fibre. There are many wonderful nutritional benefits from adding lentils and beans to meals for people with diabetes.

The latest dietary guidelines recommend 4-5 serves of legumes each week. You can purchase these prepared in a can and put them straight in your casserole at the beginning of cooking.

Starting off with lean meat is essential, but you can also reduce fat by skimming off any fat floating on the surface of your casserole. This is made easier if you cool the casserole overnight,

as the fat will set on the top and can then be lifted off easily with a spoon before reheating.

It is important to remember that meat should only be reheated once, otherwise it becomes a risk for food poisoning. Always ensure you reheat meat until it is piping hot.

If time is an issue, a casserole can be served with a slice of bread. If time permits, either rice or pasta makes a good bed to mop up the gravy and casserole juices. Just watch the amount of extra carbohydrate you serve with a one-pot meal.

Extra vegetables served with your casserole are recommended to add additional nutrients, colour, flavour and fibre.