Fast Cooking Strategies

20 practical tips for easier everyday meals.

01 Use frozen vegetables

Keep plain frozen broccoli, green beans or mixed vegetables on hand for soups, skillet meals and sides. They are already prepped, so you can skip washing and chopping. Take out the amount you need and cook according to the package directions. [1]

02 Swap dry rice for ready-cooked rice

Heat a rice pouch or cup as its label directs. Use it for bowls, sides or recipes calling for cooked rice. For dishes that start with dry rice, use a version written for precooked rice so the liquid and cooking time are correct. [2] [20]

03 Start with fully cooked chicken

Use rotisserie chicken or packaged chicken labeled fully cooked. Shred or slice it for salads and wraps, or choose soup and casserole recipes written for cooked chicken. Follow package directions; reheat chicken leftovers to 165°F. [3] [17]

04 Choose canned beans

Drain and rinse canned black beans, chickpeas or white beans. They are already cooked, so you can add them to salads, bowls and soups without soaking or simmering dried beans. Choose no-salt-added or lower-sodium options when available. [4] [5]

05 Keep canned fish in the pantry

Use canned tuna or salmon as the protein in a salad, wrap or rice bowl. Drain if needed and add your usual dressing or seasonings. The fish is already cooked, so there is no raw fish to thaw or cook. [5] [14]

Start with three: frozen vegetables, ready-cooked rice and fully cooked chicken. Pick plain options and add the flavors you like.

Skip a few steps

Simple swaps and quick ways to use your microwave.

06 Buy ready-to-eat greens and slaw

Choose bagged greens or shredded cabbage labeled prewashed or ready-to-eat. These can be used without washing again. Add them to salads, bowls and wraps. Wash other fresh produce before preparing it. [6]

07 Keep chopped cooking bases frozen

Look for frozen diced onion or a chopped onion, carrot and celery blend. Add the amount your recipe needs and follow the package cooking directions. This skips the peeling and chopping at the start of soups, sauces and stews. [7]

08 Use a prepared sauce

Keep a jar of marinara or another sauce you enjoy for quick pasta, chicken or vegetable meals. It replaces a separate sauce-making step. Compare labels for sodium and added sugar, and check ingredients if you need gluten-free or dairy-free options. [5]

09 Microwave potatoes instead of baking

Scrub a potato, pierce the skin several times and place it on a microwave-safe plate. Microwave, turning partway through, until tender. Timing depends on size and microwave power. Carefully split it and add cooked chicken or beans for a simple meal. [8]

10 Steam vegetables in the microwave

For 2 cups of cut fresh vegetables, add 1-2 tablespoons of water to a microwave-safe dish. Use a vented microwave-safe lid. Broccoli or carrots typically take 3-4 minutes on HIGH; rest 1-2 minutes, then check tenderness. Add time as needed. [9]

Microwave tip: follow package directions and resting times. Open hot lids and pouches carefully, with steam directed away from you.

Make cooking easier

Small changes that reduce cooking or cleanup work.

11 Choose thin chicken cutlets

Buy thin cutlets, or butterfly a chicken breast and gently pound it to an even thickness. Thinner, even pieces cook more quickly than thick breasts. Use a food thermometer: chicken needs to reach 165°F. Keep raw chicken and its utensils separate from ready-to-eat food. [10] [17] [18]

12 Cut firm vegetables smaller

Cut carrots, potatoes and other firm vegetables into smaller, similar-sized pieces when you want them to cook faster. Follow a recipe suited to that cut and start checking earlier if you reduce the piece size. [11]

13 Cover water while it heats

Put a lid on the pot while bringing water to a boil. The lid holds in heat and helps the water boil sooner. Once you add the food, follow the recipe or package directions for whether to leave the pot covered. [12]

14 Choose a one-pan dinner

Use a recipe designed to cook protein and vegetables together on one sheet pan. Follow its cut sizes and timing so the ingredients finish together. This reduces dishes and hands-on work, even when the total oven time is not shorter. [13]

15 Snip herbs with kitchen scissors

Use clean kitchen scissors to snip washed herbs directly over a bowl or finished dish. It skips the knife-and-board step for a small garnish. Scissors work especially well when you need only a little herb at the end of cooking. [12]

Easy to adapt: choose sauces, seasonings and prepared foods that fit your dietary needs. Check labels for gluten and milk ingredients.

Make the next meal easier

A little preparation now means fewer steps later.

16 Cook one base for different meals

Cook extra plain ground meat or chicken once, then divide it for different meals. Change the sauce or seasoning when you serve it: the same base can go into tacos, bowls or soup. Plan shared ingredients so you have fewer foods to prepare. [13]

17 Freeze your own cooked rice portions

When you cook rice, make extra. Divide it into shallow containers, chill promptly, then freeze meal-sized portions in freezer-safe containers. Label them so you can grab one for a future bowl or side. [1] [16] [17]

18 Make a second meal while you cook

Double a freezer-friendly soup, chili or stew. Divide the extra into individual containers, chill promptly and freeze for another day. You do the main prep once and have a meal ready to reheat. [13] [16] [19]

19 Get ingredients and tools ready first

Read the recipe and gather the pan, tools and ingredients. Measure or prepare anything that must be added quickly. This prevents mid-cook searches and helps you spot missing ingredients before you begin. [15]

20 Keep a scrap bowl beside you

Set a bowl next to your cutting board for peels, stems and other food scraps. Empty it when prep is finished. It reduces trips to the bin and keeps your work area clear while you cook. [12]

Store safely: refrigerate cooked food, including rice, within 2 hours (1 hour above 90°F) in shallow containers. Keep the fridge at 40°F or below. Use leftovers within 3-4 days or freeze; reheat to 165°F. [16] [17]

Sources & videos

Tap an underlined title to open the original source. The small numbers beside each tip point to these references.

01 **Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics**
Cooking Tips for One or Two
Tips 1 and 17

02 **Carolina Rice**
Ready to Heat White Jasmine Rice
Tip 2: product heating directions

03 **American Heart Association**
Quick Fixes for Family Meals When Time Is Tight
Tip 3

04 **Iowa State University Extension**
Beans: Spend Smart. Eat Smart.
Tip 4

05 **American Heart Association**
Staple Ingredients for Quick Healthy Meals
Tips 5 and 8

06 **U.S. Food and Drug Administration**
Selecting and Serving Produce Safely
Tip 6: ready-to-eat produce

07 **Good Food**
10 Top Tips to Make Meal Prep Easier
Tip 7: frozen chopped cooking bases

08 **Mississippi State University Extension**
How to Make Microwave Baked Potatoes
Tip 9

09 **Oregon State University Extension**
Microwave Fresh Vegetables
Tip 10: water, cooking and resting guidance

10 **Good Food**
How to Butterfly Chicken Breasts
Tip 11: even thickness for faster cooking

Sources & videos

Video guides are marked below. Sources checked November 11, 2026.

11 **Jamie Oliver**
14 Tips for Cooking on a Budget
Tip 12: smaller vegetable pieces

12 **Good Food**
10 Quick Kitchen Hacks Everyone Needs to Know
Tips 13, 15 and 20

13 **Mayo Clinic Health System**
Timesaving Tips for Cooking Healthy Meals
Tips 14, 16 and 18

14 **Maricopa County, Arizona**
Seafood
Tip 5: canned seafood is already cooked

15 **University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension**
Use Mise en Place to Make Meal Preparation Easier
Tip 19: get ingredients and equipment ready

16 **USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service**
How Do I Handle Leftovers Safely?
Chilling, storage temperatures and storage time

17 **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention**
Preventing Food Poisoning
Chicken, reheating, microwave use and safe handling

18 **Good Housekeeping | VIDEO**
How To Butterfly and Prepare Chicken Breasts
Tip 11: cutting and flattening demonstration

19 **America's Test Kitchen / PBS | VIDEO + TRANSCRIPT**
Make-Ahead Masterclass
Tip 18: meal-prep segment covers freezing in portions

20 **Carolina Rice**
FAQ: How To Cook Carolina Rice Products
Tip 2: using cooked rice in soups and other dishes