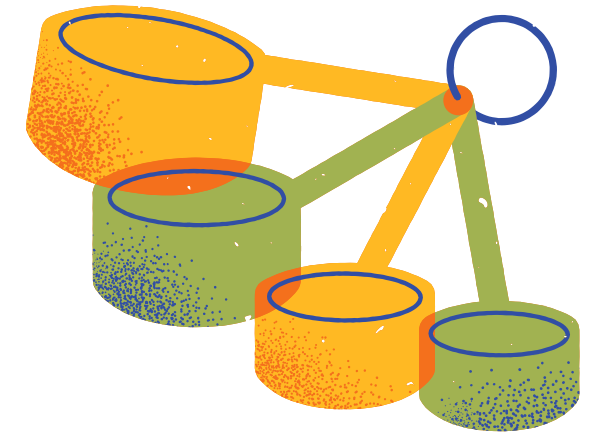


Cooking for One



Understanding
and improving
the food
practices of
people who live
alone



Thank you for your participation in the Cooking for One study in 2021!

Through your and others' efforts, we learned valuable information about how people who live alone cook and eat. We put together this document to introduce you to some of our initial findings and tell you more about our plans for the future.

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Participants came from varied ethnic and racial backgrounds. We had 6 Asian participants, 5 who were Black or African American, 6 who identified as Latina/o/x or Hispanic, 40 who were white non-Hispanic, and 3 who reported multiple or mixed-racial identities.

? Who did we speak with? ?

We spoke to a wide variety of people from Champaign, Knox, and McDonough Counties between May and November of 2021. Below is a brief breakdown of some of the demographics of people who participated:

38 participants were single, 7 were partnered but not cohabitating, 11 were divorced, 3 were widowed, and 1 was living alone while their partner was in an extended-care home.

- 31 people from Champaign County
- 21 people from McDonough County
- 8 people from Knox County

- 22 participants young adults (under 30)
- 23 middle age (between 30 and 59)
- 15 older adults (60+)

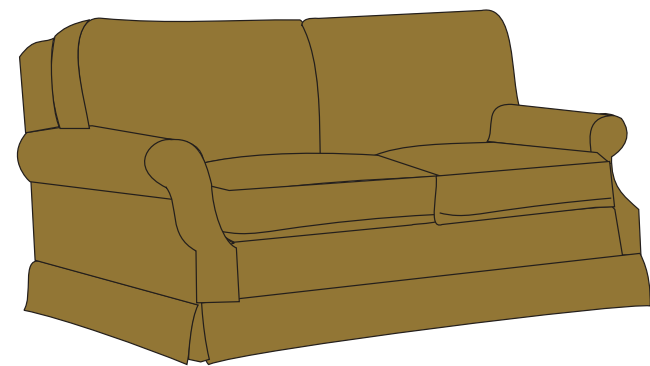
People in the study had lived alone between 1 week and 48 years. The average amount of time alone was 11.5 years.

- 35 participants were women
- 21 were men, including 1 trans man
- 4 identified as genderqueer or non-conforming

How do people who live alone cook and eat?

One of the main goals of this study was to learn about how people who live alone cook and eat. This is an under-explored area, so researchers know very little about people like you compared to those who live in other living situations. We found that the food practices of single-living people vary greatly due to other differences between them, such as their ages, their household incomes, and where they live. However, we did notice several commonalities among the participants we spoke to:

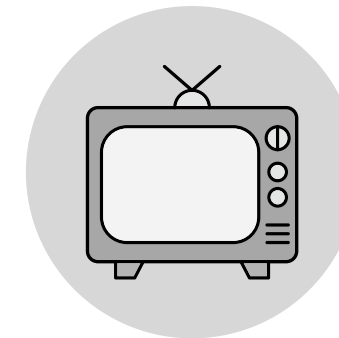
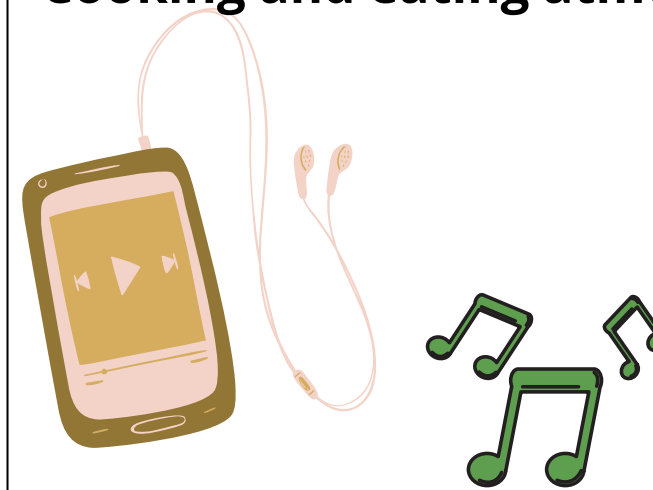
Where people eat:



- Participants rarely ate at the kitchen table. They often ate on their couches or sofas in the living room, at their kitchen counters, or at their desks for those who worked remotely due to COVID-19.
- Contrary to common stereotypes that associate eating on the couch with poor eating habits, **where** people ate wasn't indicative of **what** they ate. Many people ate healthy, nourishing meals in various locations, not just at their kitchen tables.



Cooking and eating atmosphere:



- It was common for participants to have something on in the background while preparing or eating food. Some participants cooked and ate in silence (cooking, in particular, was a more commonly silent activity), but these people were a minority.
- While cooking, people often listened to music or podcasts, or sometimes watched television.
- While eating, people were more likely to watch TV, read a book, do work, browse the Internet, or interact with others on their phones.
- Many commented that these background sounds were an important way to feel a sense of energy and activity in their houses to avoid feeling lonely.

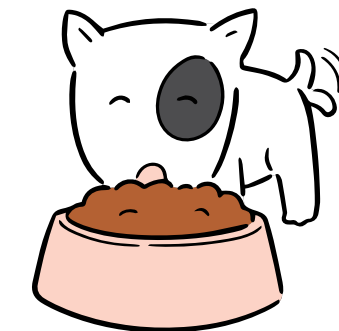
Food Interactions:



- Participants most often cooked and ate alone. However, many texted with or audio or video called friends or family, especially when eating.
- The COVID-19 pandemic normalized regular video calling and messaging for people in this study. These interactions became a much more regular part of people's routines over this period.
- Cooking was commonly considered a more solitary activity than eating. Participants' explanations for this varied, but eating appears to be a lower-stress and lower-stakes environment for socializing over food than cooking. Cooking for others was also a common way participants showed others they cared about them.

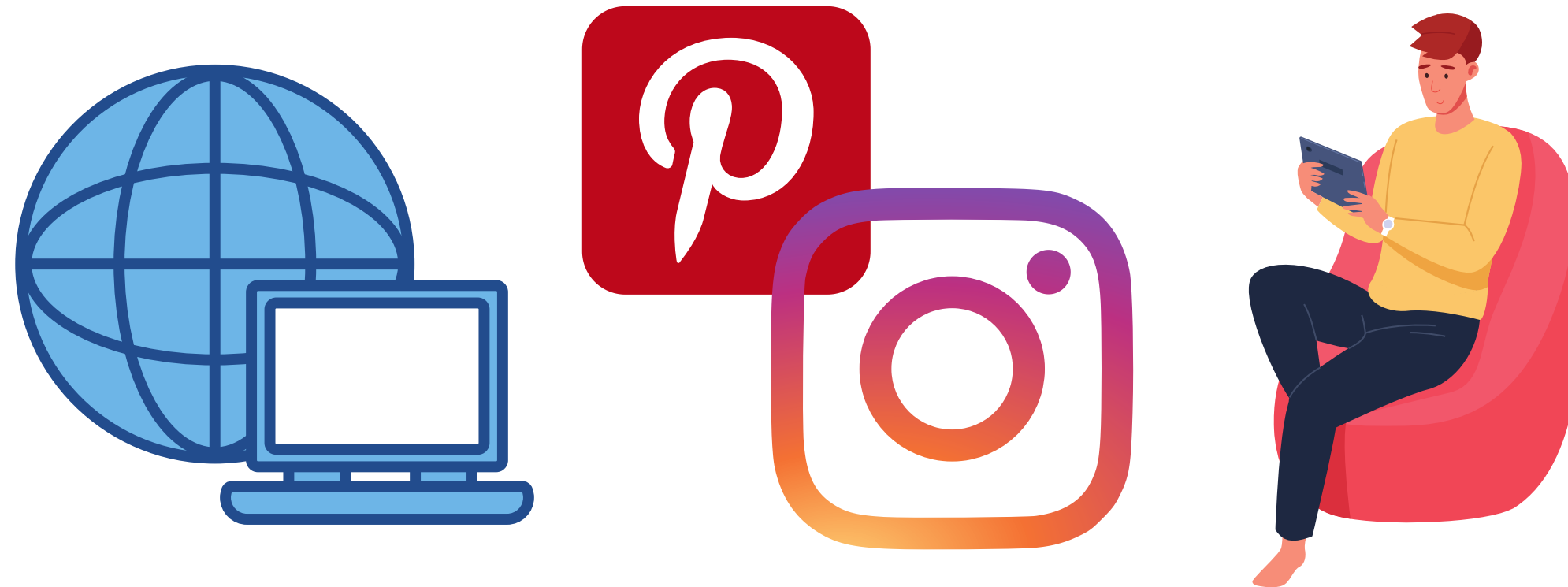


- Eating out was the most common space for participants to socialize with others over food rather than in their homes. Still, many participants did have one or two important people they would have over for meals on a semi-regular basis.
- If people had pets, they seemed to enjoy sharing mealtimes with them, although that didn't necessarily entail sharing their food.



Food Information:

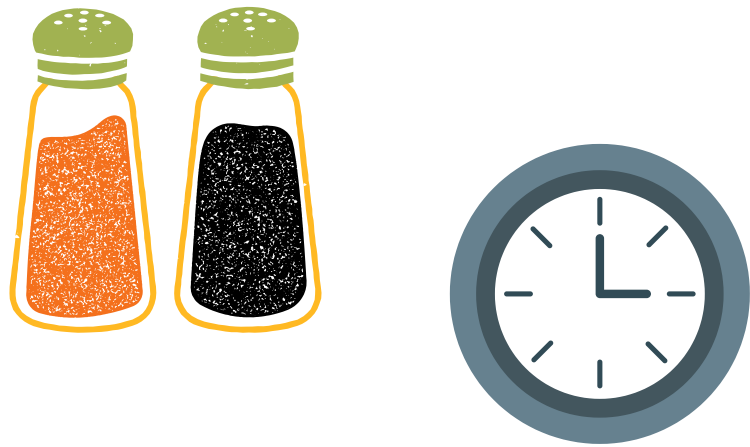
- People most often looked to the Internet for food and cooking-related resources, but these sources of information varied quite a bit from person to person.
- Some people found information on social media platforms such as Pinterest and Instagram, as well as online food community apps or Facebook or Reddit groups. Importantly, these online communities brought an aspect of human connection to information searching and sharing and were a common way for participants to connect with a community of people over food, even when they were strangers.



- Cooking shows or YouTube videos were also common resources, and these sources provided entertainment as well as information.
- One last information source that seemed widely appreciated by participants was Illinois Extension. This arm of the university is dedicated to promoting life-long learning among residents of local Illinois communities to benefit their health and wellbeing. This includes the area of nutrition, where Extension runs workshops, compiles online resources, and runs a newsletter and food blog, all dedicated to a variety of food-related topics. For those unfamiliar with Extension's food-related resources, more information can be found online at <https://extension.illinois.edu/food> or by calling your local Extension office.

What benefits does living alone provide to cooking and eating?

1



Our conversations with participants highlight the immense pleasure and opportunity that come from being able to cook and eat “just for yourself” – i.e., or on your own terms, without having to worry about other peoples’ tastes, demands, and schedules.

3



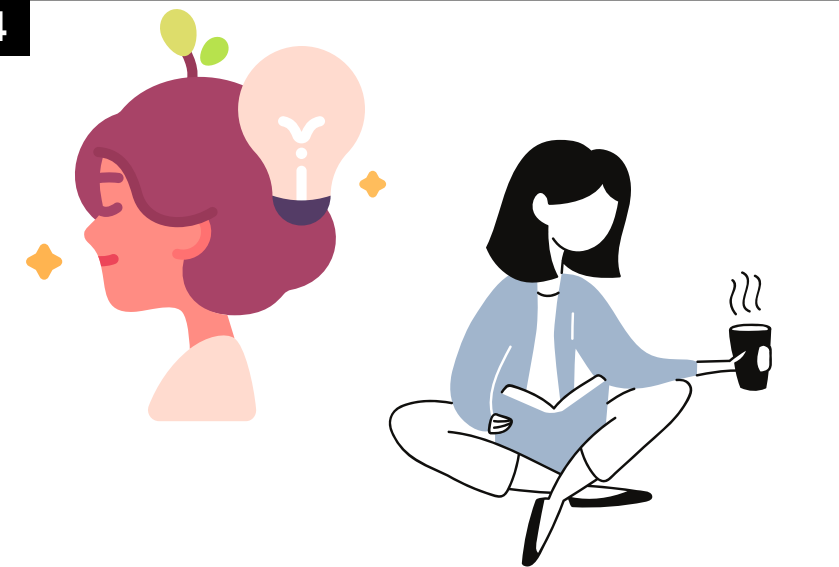
These circumstances allowed some people to be more creative with their food practices and tailor them to their specific tastes.

2



Participants described a sense of freedom associated with being able to cook and eat without others’ judgment or the pressure to impress and therefore rarely felt stressed or anxious about cooking.

4



This was an especially widespread feeling among women who had previously been the primary cooks in their families and were no longer responsible for that work. It was also a common feeling among young people who had moved out of their childhood homes for the first time.

What can we learn from people who live alone?

Our society has quite narrow standards about what a complete or proper household meal should look like, which leads to pretty rigid ideas about what healthy eating means. These ideas are often centered around families and couples and can exclude people who do not live in these household forms. In contrast, we believe that people who live alone can help us rethink what a nourishing meal looks like beyond the “normal” definition of a shared meal around a dinner table!

Participants’ meals bore little resemblance with mainstream definitions of “good” eating, but they were nourishing and were rarely produced with the stress or anxiety characteristic of cooking for others.



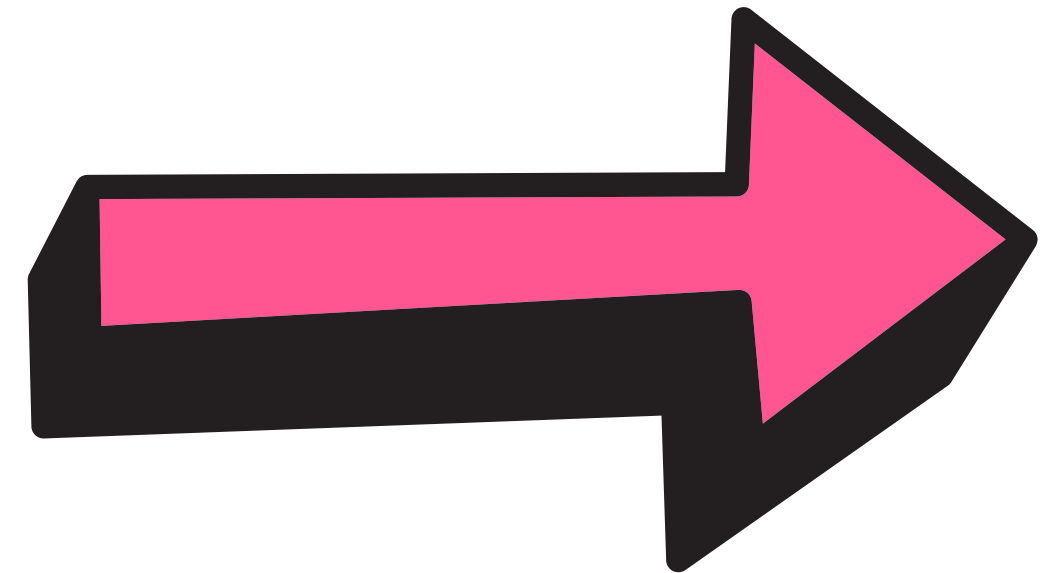
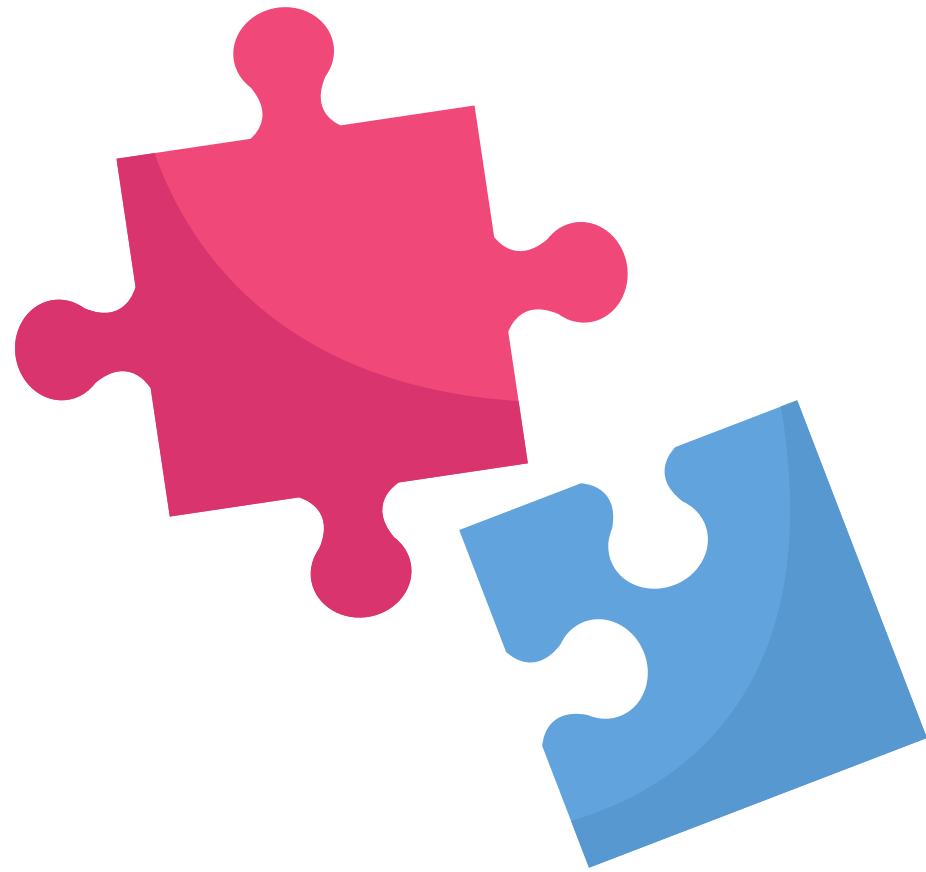
These meals were often simple, weren’t always cohesive, and often were repetitive. They regularly reflected an emphasis or prioritization on convenience, effort, and sometimes, health, less so than taste, presentation, or variety, which are more common when cooking for others.



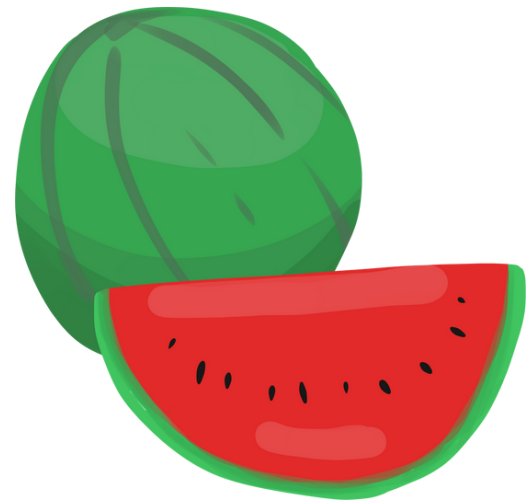
For example, participants’ meals could look like a big salad eaten with popcorn on the couch in front of the television, a bagel with cream cheese and lox alongside raw vegetables while working from home, or the same batch of chili every night for a week.



What food-related challenges do people who live alone face?



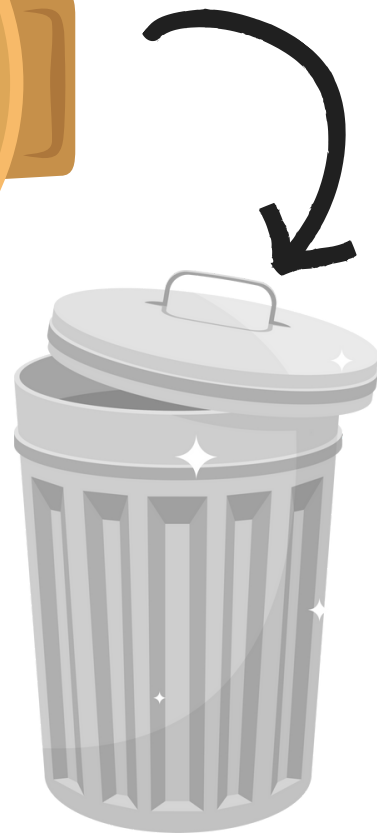
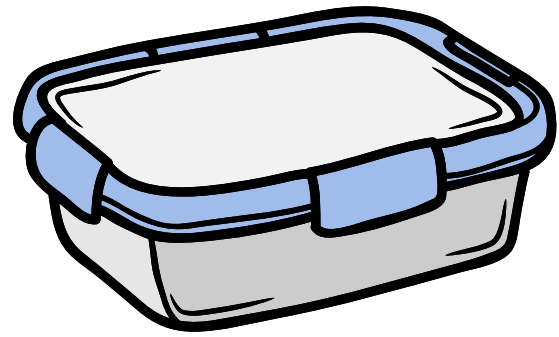
Product Amounts:



- One of the main challenges participants reported was that foods were commonly sold in amounts that were too large for one person to consume.
- People also found it difficult to use meal kits or participate in CSAs (community supported agriculture) because they came in quantities too large for them to get through alone.
- This contributed to many other issues, including:
 - Reluctancy to buy fresh fruits and vegetables
 - Wasting food
 - Overeating so as to not waste food
- These practices can have adverse outcomes, not only for people's health but also for their budgets and the environment.



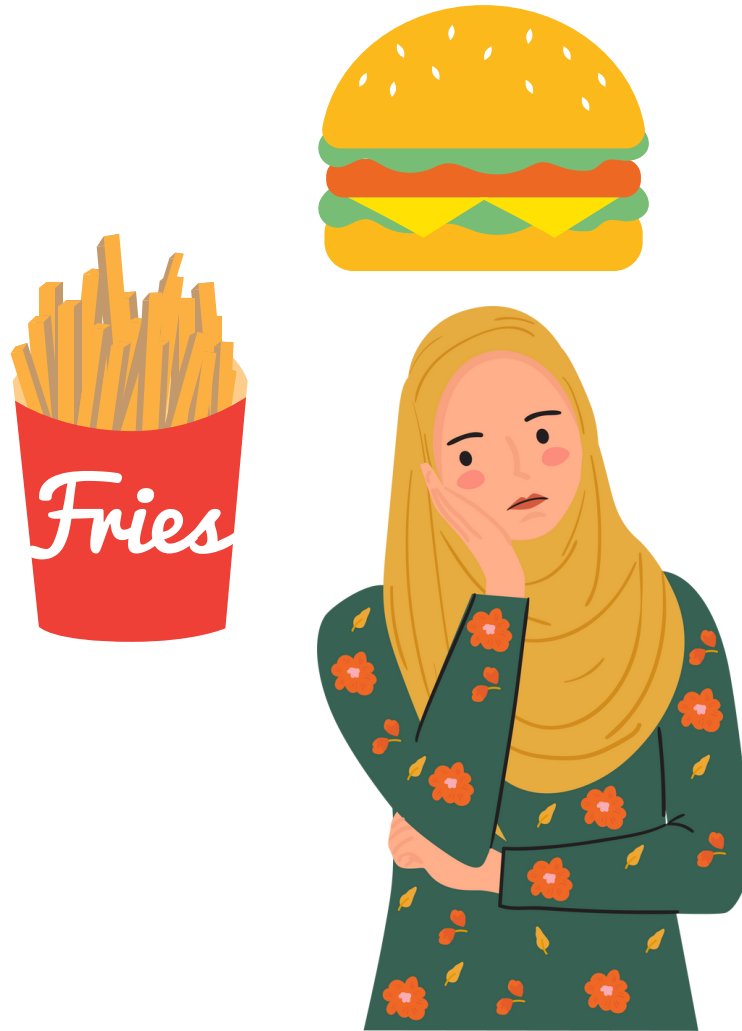
Recipe sizes:



- Participants also regularly found it hard to find recipes tailored for one person. Many people said they often adapted recipes or cut them down, but this was not always easy depending on the ingredients in the recipe. Some also found it hard to know what portion size would work best for them.
- This meant that many people often cooked meals in much larger quantities than they'd prefer. People did different things with the leftovers to reduce waste:
 - Some would freeze extra food and eat it at another time, but this only works for certain types of meals like soups and casseroles.
 - Many ended up repeating meals or eating the same food over and over throughout the week to finish the leftovers, but not everyone enjoyed that amount of repetition.
 - Many admitted to throwing away more food than they'd like because of this.
- Some people found that they were reluctant to try new foods or recipes because there would be so much to eat or throw out if they didn't like it.
- There was one silver lining to having extra food: for some people who had friends or community to share with, it could help facilitate social interactions around food: participants would sometimes invite someone over or share their food with others to help them get through the food.

Isolation:

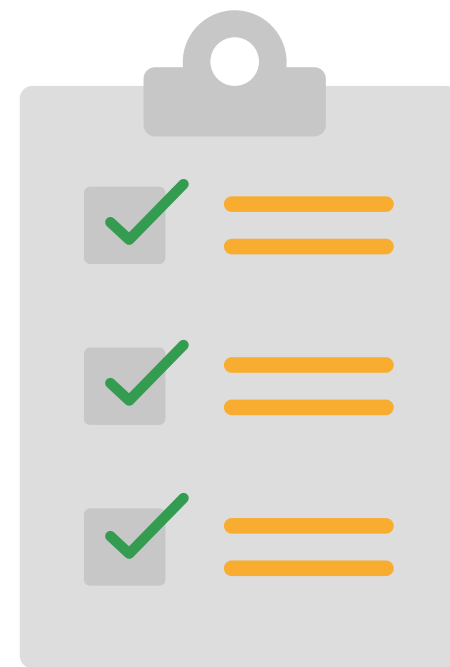
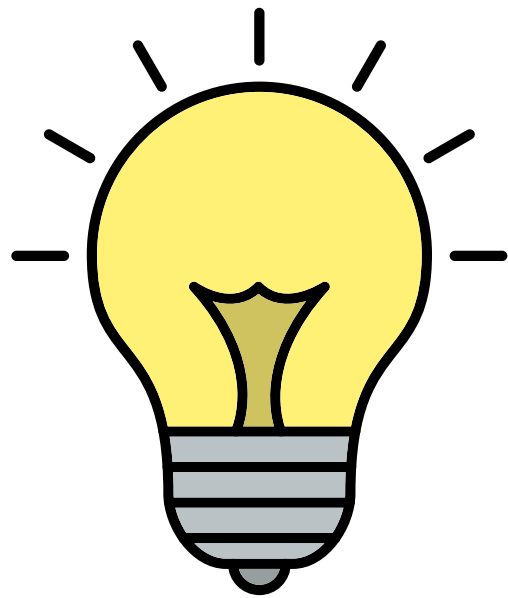
- Many participants found it challenging to be the only one responsible for all the work involved in cooking: i.e., grocery shopping, planning, preparing, cooking, and clean up. This work is often shared by those who live communally, but for people who live alone, it's all on them.
- Many people also found it hard to motivate themselves to cook when it was just themselves. Cooking and eating in isolation took away some of the meaning or feeling of importance from the act of cooking. Many people expressed not cooking as often or as elaborately as they would have liked to.
- Some participants missed having the accountability of others to help them eat well and model healthy eating habits.



- Some participants also felt a sense of loneliness associated with cooking, but especially eating. Again, this was especially common for women who had previously cooked for others, like spouses or children, and found pleasure, purpose, and identity in that work.
- Some people who lived in rural communities, especially those who were new to the community, found that the social isolation they experienced living alone was amplified in a rural area as it was challenging to find spaces to meet others. In contrast, it was common for those who had lived in the same rural area for long periods to have a robust community, and food commonly played a significant role in those connections.

Tips, Strategies, & Recipes!

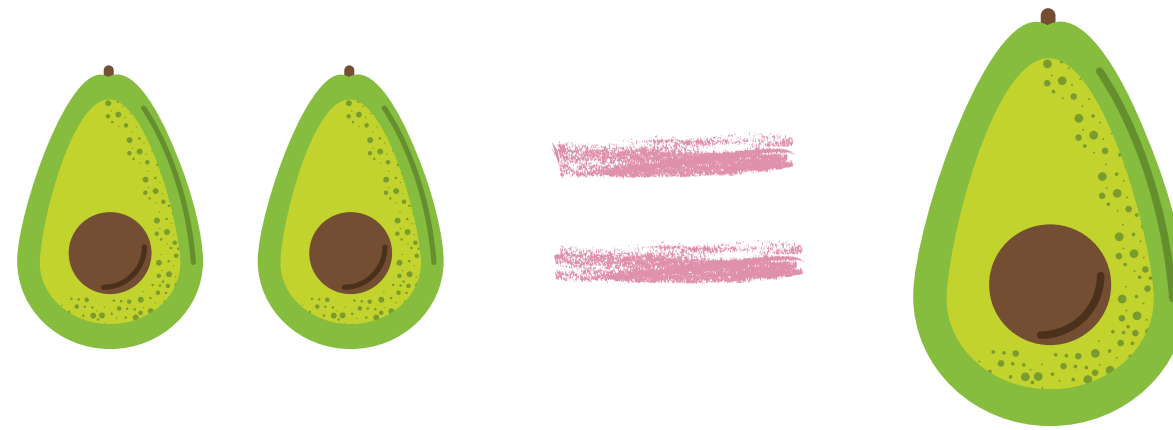
The Cooking for One project will be working over the next few years to build supports for people who live alone to help counter some of the challenges you face. In the meantime, we have compiled a brief list of strategies that many participants have found helpful when navigating cooking for one...



Consider buying more frozen fruits and vegetables than fresh ones. Many people don't know, but frozen fruit and veg are just as nutritious as fresh!



When you have spare time to cook, think about helping your "future self" out by doing a bit of meal or ingredient preparation. Consider making multiple servings to save for later, or even just chopping or preparing some ingredients and storing them away to eat throughout the week. You can do this during a scheduled weekly time to keep yourself organized and consistent, or simply whenever you find you have time.



When buying fresh produce by the pound or other weight unit, buy smaller sizes of each food item so that it is not too difficult to eat at once. This way, you don't need to be concerned about storage! For example, at the grocery store, it may be beneficial to buy two small avocados instead of one large one.



Try preparing snack plates if you are not particularly hungry for an entire meal or don't have the energy to cook. There are still simple ways to incorporate small amounts of various foods in your fridge or pantry (like nuts, hummus, crackers, cheese, and raw fruits and veggies) that still have a diversity of nutrients.



Cook meals that you can easily portion or cut down and freeze, such as casseroles, instant pot meals, soups, and grilling in the summer. This can be one way to take advantage of recipes that may seem daunting because they are meant for a larger number of people.

Cooking for One or Two



Set the table and light a candle for yourself! Single-person households are on the rise and if you find yourself in this situation, do not despair. Grocery stores are taking notice and are catering more to single-person households. Every department offers plenty of choices for individual purchases.

MAXIMIZE YOUR MEALS AND SAVE MONEY:

- Make a shopping list, plan out your menus for the week.
- Look for any sale items or coupons to save money.
- Try to buy only the amount of food you will eat in a week.
- Repackage, label, and freeze extra food in single servings.
- Cook once, eat twice. Label and freeze in heat-and-eat individual portions.

The family dynamics of today are diverse, and the markets have adapted to offer many choices and sizes. Cooking for one can be creative and rewarding with or without leftovers. Indulge, choose what you like to cook, and get the good smells going in your kitchen!



The key to success is planning. Planning helps to minimize trips to the grocery store and decrease impulse purchases. With good planning, you can save time and money. It can also help by reducing food waste. Cooking for one begins with making a plan to buy the right ingredients to make meals for a week. Eat a wide variety of foods each week. Variety helps you get all the essential nutrients and makes eating more fun! Enjoy trying a new fruit, vegetable, or grain product. Choose foods from all food groups using [ChooseMyPlate.gov](https://www.choosemyplate.gov). Take advantage of quality convenience products packaged for one or two persons.

CUT YOUR RECIPES IN HALF USING THESE EASY MEASUREMENTS

- Half of 1/4 Cup equals 2 Tablespoons
- Half of 1/3 Cup equals 2 Tablespoons + 2 teaspoons
- Half of 1/2 Cup equals 1/4 Cup
- Half of 2/3 Cup equals 1/3 Cup
- Half of 1 Tablespoon equals 1 1/2 teaspoons
- Half of 1 teaspoon equals 1/2 teaspoon
- Half of 1/2 teaspoon equals 1/4 teaspoon
- Half of 1/4 teaspoon equals 1/8 teaspoon
- Half of 1/8 teaspoon equals a dash

Find resources at the **Illinois Extension's** website related to nutrition, saving money while buying food, and avoiding food waste:

<https://extension.illinois.edu/food>. They even have

a page dedicated to "Cooking for One or Two!"

<https://extension.illinois.edu/food/cooking-one-or-two>



Extension also has a tip-sheet you can view here:

https://extension.illinois.edu/sites/default/files/cooking_for_one.pdf





ONE-DISH MEAL



30 MINUTES, COMFORT FOOD, DINNER, EASY, MIDWEEK RECIPES, ONE PORTION RECIPES, ONE-DISH MEAL, QUICKFIX, SUMMER, VEGETARIAN, WINTER

Super Quick Pan Fried Pizza Bianca

by Andree-Anne 1 comment

Fancy making a pizza from scratch faster [...]



30 MINUTES, DINNER, EASY, FISH, MIDWEEK RECIPES, ONE PORTION RECIPES, ONE-DISH MEAL, SUMMER

Baked Parmesan Courgette Fries and Mediterranean Fish

by Andree-Anne 28 comments

Guys! I'm so obsessed with the recipe I'm sharing [...]



30 MINUTES, AUTUMN, DINNER, MEAT, MIDWEEK RECIPES, ONE PORTION RECIPES, ONE-DISH MEAL

Spanish style chicken with olives and peppers

by Andree-Anne 1 comment

For once, I'm sharing something where the meat is the [...]

There are several food blogs with a specific focus on cooking for one:

- Singly Scrumptious: <http://singlyscrumptious.com>
- One Dish Kitchen: <https://onedishkitchen.com>
- Nourish Nutrition Blog: <https://www.nourishnutritionblog.com>
- Food Cheats: <https://www.foodcheats.com>
- Single Serving Chef: <https://singleservingchef.com>



r/EatCheapAndHealthy Search Reddit

Log In

Posted by u/BushyEyes 11 days ago

200 My favorite one-pot meal! Lemony chicken, potatoes, and tomatoes!

PIC: <https://i.imgur.com/xb5vEpD.jpg>

I used bone-in, skin-on chicken thighs because they were the cheapest but this meal is sooo easy and so versatile. I just used some veggies I got from the farmer's market, but you can make tons of substitutions depending on what you have on hand.

Substitutions:

- **Chicken thighs:** Use boneless cubed chicken breasts or boneless, skinless chicken thighs, or you can make it vegetarian with chickpeas!
- **Yellow Potatoes:** Sweet potatoes, butternut squash, or any other root veggie you have
- **Roma tomatoes:** Use a can of whole peeled or diced tomatoes

20 Comments Share Save

Posted by u/CapcomBowling 12 days ago

42 Besides Rotisserie Chicken, what other ready to eat or prepared foods are cheap and healthy? Ask ECAH

44 Comments Share Save

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- Reddit has various subgroups such as r/EatCheapAndHealthy
 - <https://www.reddit.com/r/EatCheapAndHealthy/>
 - ...which includes posts on cooking for a single person [\[https://www.reddit.com/r/EatCheapAndHealthy/comments/92lfnh/struggling_cooking_for_one/\]](https://www.reddit.com/r/EatCheapAndHealthy/comments/92lfnh/struggling_cooking_for_one/)

Wrap It Up!

Recipe by: Alice Henneman, MS, RD, UNL
Extension Educator in Lancaster County



Ingredients (1 serving):

- 1 8- to 10-inch whole wheat tortilla
- 1 to 2 tablespoons "dressing" to moisten contents, such as salad dressing, low-fat mayonnaise, salsa, guacamole, hummus
- 1/2 cup of your favorite combination of chopped, shredded or leafy vegetables (e.g. tomatoes, cucumbers, carrots, lettuce, cabbage, spinach, onions, peppers, celery, olives, avocado, jicama, radishes)
- 1/4 cup of a protein food, such as sliced, cooked, meat; flaked fish; tuna or salmon; cooked dried beans; refried beans; a scrambled egg or chopped, hard-cooked egg
- 1 to 2 tablespoons shredded cheese

Directions:

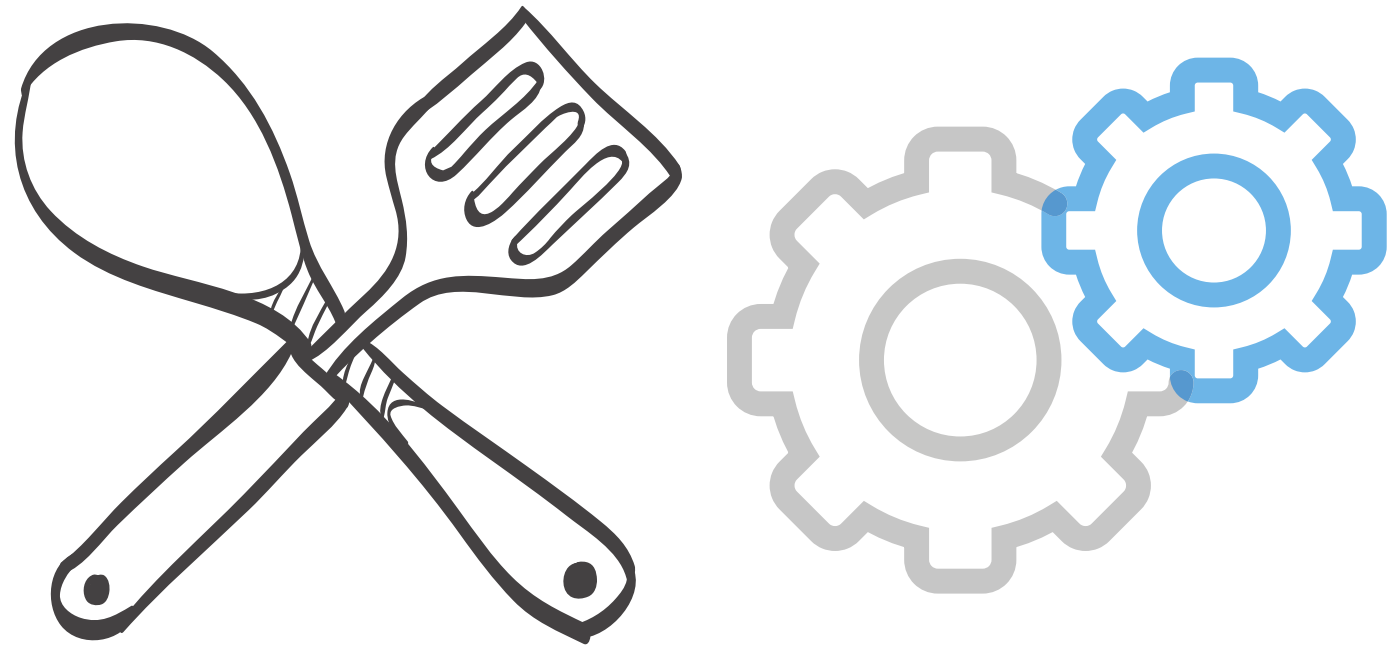
1. Follow package directions for preparing the tortilla before filling it — you will often be advised to heat the tortilla briefly (e.g. in a microwave oven or a hot pan) to make it more pliable.
2. Mix all filler ingredients together and spread on the tortilla. Or, you can layer them on the wrap and top with the dressing. Leave a 1-inch margin around the edge of the tortilla.
3. Roll up the tortilla and enjoy! There are several ways to wrap a wrap; two common methods are:
 - a. Method 1: Simply start rolling from one side until the wrap is completely rolled.
 - b. Method 2: Fold in one or both ends and roll up the tortilla

Tip 1: To help hold the wrap together, wrap it in tin foil, wax paper, plastic wrap or parchment paper; or place in a small plastic bag such as a sandwich bag.

Tip 2: If you plan to prepare the wrap to eat later, start with a layer of well-dried lettuce leaves or other leafy green base. This will help keep the tortilla from becoming soggy.



The Future of Cooking For One



The Cooking for One project has lots planned for the future! Funding permitted, we are hoping to hold community workshops in early 2023 with both past participants and representatives from community organizations to:

- 1) Identify what resources exist within the Knox, McDonough, and Champaign communities to support the food and health practices of people who live alone.
- 2) Think through the remaining gaps or barriers to support.
- 3) Brainstorm ideas for future actions or interventions to support people who live alone.

Look out for future emails from our research team. We would love to have your input in this process!

Personnel and Support

The Cooking for One project has benefitted greatly from the support and guidance of its co-investigators:

Dr. Melissa Ocepek – Assistant Professor, School of Information Sciences, UIUC.

Dr. Melissa Pflugh Prescott – Assistant Professor, Food Science and Human Nutrition, UIUC.

Dr. Brenna Ellison – Associate Professor, Agricultural Economics, Purdue University

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We also want to thank the graduate and undergraduate research assistants who worked on the project over the past year:

Tani Akinbode, Graduate Student in Human Development and Family Studies

Iulia Ciubotariu, Graduate Student in Food Sciences and Human Nutrition

Lo Lee, Graduate Student in Information Sciences

Taylor Wen, Undergraduate Student in Food Sciences and Human Nutrition

Alejandro Suárez, Graduate Student in Education Policy



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