

Meal Bags: ready-to-cook ingredients and recipe

Healthy Start for Mom & Me, Winnipeg

A Meal Bag contains the recipe for a nutritious meal that will feed 4 to 8, and the non-perishable and measured ingredients, needed to make it. Meal Bags are available to women who attend Healthy Start drop-in programs for \$1.50, a cost representing from 50 - 100% of the total cost of production. Any perishable ingredients needed must be purchased by the family – but these are always minimal, simple and inexpensive. Meal Bags can help stretch the family's food budget – and create a skill-building opportunity.

Meal Bags were actually devised with another idea in mind – for streamlining the demands of producing meals at multiple locations each week. The idea of making them available to participants came as a second, sudden, positive thought, inspired by the Good Food Box model in Toronto. Charging a nominal sum fit with our belief that the charity model needs adapting, that women should be offered choices and that paying creates pride.

In addition to cost and nutrition, Healthy Start for Mom & Me Meal Bags are designed with several other considerations in mind. For example:

- * All Healthy Start for Mom & Me Meal Bag recipes can be made using minimum kitchen gear, some needing only a pot, a spoon and one burner. (Most women who attend our drop-ins have simple kitchens with only basic equipment, tools and utensils.)
- * All Meal Bag recipes require only basic cooking techniques, typically mixing, stirring and using an oven or burner. In addition, recipes are written clearly, in plain language, in numbered steps that can be followed easily. (Some participants have little or no cooking experience; literacy may also be an issue.)
- * Meal Bag recipe ingredients are commonplace, linking participants to foods that are easy to find. (Some participants have little experience with healthy food shopping, or with food shopping in Canada. In addition, getting around is a significant challenge: most women who attend our drop-ins have to food shop within walking distance of their homes and are therefore restricted to a limited number of food stores.)
- * Meal Bags can be kept on hand safely for several months and saved for a “rainy day”. (Most participants are low on money near the end of the month. Those who have our Meal Bags may be somewhat less reliant on food banks and other sources of emergency aid.)
- * Meal Bag recipes can be readily adapted to suit the family's cultural food traditions, individual tastes, and religious requirements. Newcomers to Canada feel they are learning to cook “western” or “Canadian” foods.

Families buy Healthy Start for Mom & Me Meal Bags for many reasons: to supplement their food budget; to try out new foods at minimum cost; to introduce new foods to family members at minimum cost; as emergency food; to “kick start” a healthy eating plan; to practise cooking.

Staff dietitians adapt or develop the Meal Bag recipes. Soups are frequent and we occasionally do desserts. Recipes are often field-tested with participants or with a small group of moms who we pay to cook, taste and revise to ensure the Meal Bags are as useful and tasty as they can be to those who will use them. Recipes include such things as: Tomato Bean Soup, Rice & Chick Pea Salad, Chicken & Vegetable Fettuccini (canned chicken), Taco Soup, Spaghetti with Tomato - lentil Sauce, Peach Crumble.

For the labour-intensive job of assembling Meal Bags (we make up to 2,000 at a time), community volunteers are involved, such as classes of middle school students. This gives a good opportunity to engage community members in our work and for discussion of food security and other poverty issues. Bulk-buying enables the project to be cost-effective.

At Healthy Start for Mom & Me, Meal Bags serve a dual purpose of creating a skill-building, food security option for participants as well as a time-saving way of managing simple cooking in a large program. The Meal Bag concept has been adopted by some other groups and in particular by the First Nations and Inuit Health Branch's Canada Prenatal Nutrition Programs in Manitoba that produced a "how-to" manual. Others may find the concept useful too - community kitchens, food banks, cooking classes, community cupboards or food buying clubs.

Healthy Start for Mom & Me has been running drop-in outreach programs since 1997 in low-income Winnipeg neighbourhoods. We work with pregnant women and girls, and those with infants up to 1 year, who, in the face of considerable social and economic barriers, are striving to improve their chances of having healthy, successful pregnancies, and their newborns' chances of optimal development. They are especially interested in information, skills, strategies and tools that help them meet their own and their families' nutritional needs. Healthy Start is funded by the federal government's Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program and by the provincial government's Healthy Child Manitoba. For the initial start-up and development years, Healthy Start was sponsored by Dietitians of Canada. Healthy Start for Mom & Me is now an incorporated organization with its own Board. Healthy Start works in collaboration with many other local organizations and includes involvement from public health nurses.

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