



Meal Bags: ready-to-cook meals

Meal bags - a description

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 participants who attend Healthy Start drop-in programs for \$2.00, a cost representing from 25-40% 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 fits with our belief that people should be offered choices and that paying creates pride.



Design of a meal bag

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

- * All Healthy Start Meal Bag recipes can be made using minimum kitchen gear, some needing only a pot, a spoon and one burner.
- * 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 easy-to-follow steps.
- * Meal Bag recipe ingredients are commonplace, linking participants to foods that are easy to find.
- * Meal Bags can be kept safely for several months and saved for a “rainy day”.
- * Meal Bag recipes can be readily adapted to suit the family's cultural food traditions, individual tastes, and religious requirements.

Families buy 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 develop a healthy eating plan; to practice 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 and staff to ensure the Meal Bags are as useful, nutritious and tasty as they can be to those who will use them. Recipes include such things as: Tomato Bean Soup, Rice & Chickpea 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 1,500 at a time), community volunteers are involved, such as classes of high 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, 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 - community kitchens, food banks, cooking classes, community cupboards or food buying clubs.

Our program

Healthy Start has been running drop-in outreach programs since 1997 in Winnipeg neighbourhoods. We work with people who are pregnant, and those with infants up to 1 year. Many participants face social and economic barriers, the following is a quote from a participant:

“Poverty limits my life, especially my food choices. Healthy Start makes me feel proud of the food I make for my family, even if I’m coming from poverty. I can make food that tastes and looks amazing and I’m proud to serve it. Learning different ways to make recipes and never feeling judged is what keeps me coming back.”

Participants are interested in building their information, skills, strategies and tools to 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 Manitoba government’s Healthy Baby program. We are also supported by grants and donations.

To purchase a meal bag manual that describes how to start your own program, visit our website at www.hsmm.ca/shop-hsmm/