



Introduction

This lesson introduces an older adult audience to basic concepts that they can use to make shopping, cooking and eating easier and more enjoyable. Help participants find new strategies by inviting them to share ideas with each other and providing additional tips and resources.

Preparation

1. Review the topic.

- Start with the key concepts and discussion guide. The discussion guide provides suggested questions to draw out participants' existing knowledge as well as information you can offer in response to each question.
- Consider your participant demographics and potential interests, and conduct any additional research that may be necessary to prepare for specific questions or improve your own understanding of key concepts (see "Program Guide" for suggested resources).

2. Plan your lesson structure.

- Determine whether time and resources allow for a food-based activity or whether you will use an alternate activity. This lesson includes one alternate activity, and additional activity suggestions are available in the "Program Guide."
- See "Exercise for Health" lesson for ways to incorporate physical activity into the lesson, and plan to ask participants to share their favorite ways to exercise.
- Prepare a rough timeline of your lesson and a plan to integrate discussion with the activity. Depending on available time and participant interests, you can integrate discussion topics into an activity or use discussion time to open or close the lesson.

3. Plan how to administer pre-test (as well as post-test if this is the final session). See "Program Guide" for details.

4. Prepare materials.

- Review the appropriate activity and prepare any necessary materials.
- Choose and print handouts, recipes and pre-tests.

Suggested Recipes

Recipes should involve minimal cooking and/or cutting, emphasizing canned foods and instant grain foods (like oatmeal, couscous and bulgur).

- Easy Tuna Salad
- Chickpea Couscous Combo

Suggested Handouts

- "Make Cooking Easier"
- "Stock Your Pantry and Kitchen"
- "Try a New Flavor"
- "Vary Your Fruits and Vegetables"
- "Cooking Safety Tips"

Key Concepts

Older adults may not be interested in cooking for a variety of reasons. The activity involved in shopping and cooking can be tiring, they may not think it is worth the effort to cook if they live by themselves, they may have a reduced appetite or not find the same foods appealing anymore, or they may never have learned basic cooking skills to help them get started. Strategies for making cooking at home more appealing can include tips to make shopping easier, recipes that involve minimal prep work and single dishes, and ideas for cooking for one or making food softer and more appetizing.



Discussion Guide

Do you cook at home? Do you enjoy cooking? Why or why not? (In addition to these general suggestions, see below for strategies to address specific issues.)

- Try listening to music or the radio while you cook to make the process more enjoyable.
- Invite friends or neighbors over to cook with you; take turns reading the recipe and trying different tasks.
- Teaching children or grandchildren a favorite recipe can be a great way to spend time together and establish healthier eating habits.

If participants say they don't like going to the store or have trouble buying groceries: *What are some ways to make shopping easier?*

- Look for delivery services from major grocery stores, and try pooling orders with neighbors if meeting the minimum delivery requirement is a challenge.
- Come prepared with a grocery list so you don't have to decide what to buy once you're already at the store.
- Plan to go to the store at a time when you feel well rested or expect to have more energy.
- Try to go to the store at a time when you expect it will be less busy.
- Many stores have motorized carts that you can use to get around and carry your groceries.
- Don't be afraid to ask employees for help carrying your groceries or finding what you need.
- If shopping tires you out, look for a seat where you can rest—try the pharmacy department.

If participants say that cooking is too much effort or harder than it used to be: *What are some ways to make cooking easier? Does anyone have favorite recipes that don't even involve an oven or stove? What about favorite single-dish recipes?*

- See handout for no-cook and one-pot meal ideas.
- Stay off your feet by getting a counter-height seat or by doing prep work like chopping vegetables while sitting at a table. Recipes for baking or roasting, simmering soups and stews, or using slow cookers not only keep you off your feet but also minimize the time you spend actively cooking overall.
- Canned and frozen fruits and vegetables are often pre-cut to save you the trouble of chopping, and have similar prices to whole fresh vegetables. Although pre-cut fresh fruits and vegetables are sometimes more expensive, they may be worth the price if they help you avoid cutting and chopping.
- Consider whether basic updates to your kitchen space could make it easier for you to get around. Examples include replacing cabinet and drawer knobs with handles, purchasing a step stool and installing lighting above the stove and countertops. You can also talk to an occupational therapist about specific modifications. Tools like food processors, blenders, automatic can openers and electric mixers can make prep work easier.
- Some frozen vegetables can be cooked directly (without thawing), although frozen animal products require extra cooking time. Cook frozen vegetables by adding them to a saucepan with a small amount of boiling water. Cover, reduce the heat once the water boils, and cook until just tender.



If participants say they don't enjoy or have trouble cooking for just themselves: ***What are some ways you can make cooking and eating alone more enjoyable? What about planning group meals? What are some ideas for making small amounts of food or for using up leftovers?***

- If you don't feel like it's worth it to cook for yourself, try making meals feel like special occasions: light some candles, set your place at the table and play some music.
- If you like to be around other people even if you're eating alone, you can prepare a picnic at home and bring it to a park, picnic area or food court. Sandwiches, soups and salads are all easy meals to take on the go.
- Plan potlucks with neighbors or co-workers—no one has to be responsible for hosting a whole meal, and you may get to try some new dishes.
- Pre-prepared foods like cut fruit and salad bar items are sometimes more expensive, but may be a good choice if you know you have a hard time using up larger amounts of food.
- Avoid the hassle of reducing recipes by making a full recipe for 4 or 6 people and freezing portions to eat later.
- Plan meals that use the same ingredient in multiple ways, like cooking beans and rice one night and then using the beans in a soup later in the week. See handout for ideas for using leftovers.

If participants say they don't have the resources or knowledge to cook: ***What are some ways you can maintain a healthy diet without a full kitchen? Does anyone have any basic cooking techniques to share?***

- If you don't have an oven or stove, then slow cookers, hot plates, microwaves and toaster ovens are all good options for cooking at home. Try checking thrift stores or yard sales for economical options.
- If you don't have a refrigerator, single serving and canned foods are probably your best options. You can also try filling a cooler with ice to keep food cool for a limited amount of time. Some whole produce, like potatoes, yams, onions, winter squash and apples can be kept in a relatively cool, dry place (be sure to refrigerate once cut).
- See "Make Cooking Easier" and "Vary Your Fruits and Vegetables" handouts for additional tips.

If participants say that they have trouble eating the foods they like: ***What are some softer foods you like to eat? How do you make food more appetizing?***

- Baking apples, pears, sweet potatoes and carrots in the oven makes them softer and sweeter.
- Get one full serving of fruit from 1/2 cup applesauce, or add a cup of other fruits to a smoothies with milk or yogurt.
- Cook vegetables in soups, stews and casseroles to make them softer.
- Canned fruits and vegetables are often easier to chew—look for vegetables without added salt and fruits canned in water or their own juices rather than sugary syrup.
- Look for naturally soft foods like bananas, tomatoes, and cooked beans and potatoes.
- If you have trouble swallowing food, make sure you're drinking enough liquids (and be sure to talk to your doctor).
- If food doesn't seem appetizing to you, try experimenting with new seasonings and varying the shape, color and texture of your foods. If you don't need to eat soft foods, try cooking vegetables for less time to maintain texture and flavor.
- Medicines can change how some foods taste—talk to your doctor about how your medications could be interacting with your diet.



Suggested Activities

If you have access to basic ingredients and supplies, we recommend planning the lesson around a cooking demonstration or activity that will show participants concrete skills that apply the lesson concepts. If limited resources or time make a food-based activity impossible, use the alternate activity or any of the other suggested activities in the “Program Guide.”

A. Food-Based Activity: Couscous

Easy healthy meals that require minimal cooking can go beyond sandwiches and salads. Couscous is a type of pasta (look for whole-wheat varieties) that you can cook just by adding boiling water and letting it sit for 5 minutes. This recipe mixes in additional ingredients that don't require any extra preparation, but you can add any variety of vegetables or protein.

Discussion points to address while preparing food (see discussion guide as well):

- “Cooking” at home can be quick and easy, and doesn't even require a stove or oven. What are some “no-cook” meals?
- Canned foods can be affordable, easy to use and great options for healthy meals if you don't have easy access to an oven or stove or go shopping very frequently.
- Has anyone ever eaten or cooked couscous or bulgur? Both are grain foods that can be cooked just by covering them with boiling water and steaming for 5 minutes. You can also make oatmeal this way using rolled oats.

Materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mixing bowl(s): one for demo, or per group • Mixing spoon(s): one for demo, or per group • Sample dishes and spoons for each participant • Jar or small bowl for mixing vinaigrette • Fork(s) for couscous and vinaigrette
Preparation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start by deciding whether the activity will be a demonstration or will involve participation. If participants will be preparing food themselves, decide whether they will work alone or in groups. • Review “Program Guide” for tips on leading a cooking demo or guiding participants through a recipe. • Review ingredients and make substitutions as necessary. • Modify recipe as necessary, and print copies for participants to take home. • Drain and rinse canned chickpeas. • Boil water (try using an electric tea kettle to keep it hot).
Ingredients (Serves 8, 1 cup/serving)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 cups dry couscous • 2 cans chickpeas • Sliced almonds • Dried fruit (try cranberries, apricots or currants) • 2 tablespoons olive oil • 2 tablespoons lemon juice • Salt and pepper to taste
Directions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cover couscous with 2 cups boiling water, cover and let sit for 5 minutes. • Whisk together olive oil and lemon juice. • Fluff couscous with fork and mix with chickpeas, almonds, fruit and vinaigrette.

B. Alternate Activity: Spice it Up

Materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Variety of seasonings (try cumin, cinnamon, garam masala, basil, oregano, red pepper flakes, etc.) • Copies of “Try a New Flavor” handout for each participant
Preparation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Divide seasonings into containers to pass around. • Review handout and brainstorm or research foods to make with different spices.
Activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain that trying new seasonings can be a great way to make meals more interesting and wake up our taste buds. Ask participants what some of their favorite seasonings are; what dishes do they make with those seasonings? • Pass seasonings around and invite participants to smell them. Which are familiar and which are new? • Invite participants to share ideas for how to use various seasonings, then pass out handout and discuss health benefits of spices and suggested combinations.

Quick Chickpea Couscous

Easy healthy meals that require minimal cooking can go beyond sandwiches and salads. Couscous is a type of pasta (look for whole-wheat varieties) that you can cook just by adding boiling water and letting it sit for 5 minutes. This recipe mixes in additional ingredients that don't require any extra preparation, but you can add any variety of vegetables or protein.

INGREDIENTS

serves 8, 1 cup per serving

- 2 cups dry couscous
- 2 cans chickpeas
- Sliced almonds
- Dried fruit (try cranberries, apricots or currants)
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 2 tablespoons lemon juice
- Salt and pepper to taste

DIRECTIONS

1. Cover couscous with 2 cups boiling water, cover, and let sit for 5 minutes.
2. Whisk together olive oil and lemon juice.
3. Fluff couscous with fork and mix with chickpeas, almonds, fruit and vinaigrette.

