School is back in session. With this change, many of us are heading home wondering, “What’s for supper?” A recent survey found that 70 percent of the adult population doesn’t decide what to eat for supper until 4 p.m. or later. One way to ease the “dinner dilemma” is to plan meals like some people plan their wardrobe.

Think of the person who keeps a few basic wardrobe items and mixes them to make dozens of outfits. Try the same method in your kitchen. Keep a few basic foods in the pantry or fridge that can be combined into a multitude of healthy, filling meals.

So, what do you need to have on hand?

Assorted fresh fruits in season: These can be eaten out of hand; chopped or sliced and added to salads; sliced and served as a topper for frozen desserts; or layered with instant pudding or yogurt as a parfait.

Cheese: Make toasted cheese sandwiches; add to main dish salads; mix into a white sauce and serve with broccoli over baked potatoes or as a base for soup; or grate and use as a topping for casseroles.

Eggs: Hard cook, slice and use for a main dish salad; fry; scramble; make into an omelet; or use in egg salad sandwiches.

Frozen vegetables: Serve as is; toss into soups; add to casseroles; or thaw and use in cold salads.

Meat, poultry and fish: Plan ahead and have precooked items. When I’m cooking chicken breasts or pork chops, I cook extra. They go into the refrigerator if I plan to use them immediately, or I freeze them for later use. These items are available already cooked in the store, usually with a higher price. Though, sometimes the cooked chickens in the deli are on sale for a price less than that of a raw chicken.
Rice or pasta: Offer with seasoning as a side dish; serve topped with a sauce; mix with other foods and a white sauce or a can of soup for a casserole; use cold in salads; or add to soups. These are usually quick and easy to cook, but they can also be prepared ahead of time. I often cook brown rice in large amounts and freeze it in 2-cup measures.

So, let’s take a look at a way to transform these basic ingredients into a meal.

“Make your own” casserole: Select food(s) from each category below or use your own favorites. Combine in a buttered 2- to 2 1/2-quart casserole dish. Cover and bake at 350 degrees for about 50 minutes to 1 hour, or microwave using 50 percent power for about 15 to 30 minutes, rotating or stirring as necessary. Heat until steaming hot (165 degrees) throughout.

- Starch, select ONE: 2 cups uncooked pasta (macaroni, penne, spiral, bow tie, etc.); 1 cup uncooked long-grain white or brown rice; or 4 cups uncooked noodles. Cook according to package instructions.
- Protein, select ONE: 2 cups cooked ground beef; 2 cups cooked and diced chicken, turkey, ham, beef or pork; 2 cups chopped hard-cooked egg; 2 (6- to 8-ounce) cans fish or seafood, flaked; or 2 cups cooked or canned beans (kidney, etc.)
- Vegetable, select ONE: 1 (10-ounce) package thawed and drained frozen spinach, broccoli, green beans or green peas; 1 (16-ounce) can green beans, peas, carrots or corn, drained; or 2 cups sliced fresh zucchini.
- Sauce, select ONE: 2 cups white sauce or 1 can sauce-type soup (mushroom, celery, cheese, tomato, etc.) mixed with milk to make 2 cups or 1 (16-ounce) can diced tomatoes with juice.
- Flavor, select ONE or MORE: 1/2 cup chopped celery; 1/4 cup chopped onion; 1/4 cup sliced black olives; or 1 to 2 teaspoons mixed dried leaf herbs (basil, thyme, marjoram or tarragon). Salt and pepper to taste.
- Topping, select ONE or MORE: If desired after heating, place on top 2 tablespoons grated Parmesan cheese; 1/4 cup shredded Swiss, cheddar or Monterey Jack cheese; 1/4 cup buttered bread crumbs; or 1/4 to 1/2 cup canned fried onion rings.

Return casserole with topping(s), uncovered, to oven for about 10 minutes or to microwave for about 2 minutes.

That last minute rush can be avoided with a little planning.

Roxie Rodgers Dinstel is a professor of extension on the Tanana District Extension Faculty. Questions or column requests can be e-mailed to her at rrdinstel@alaska.edu or by calling 907-474-2426. The Cooperative Extension Service is part of the University of Alaska Fairbanks, working in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture.