

Backpack cooking for groups

Freeze-dried individual meals are easy – boil water, add to the food, stir & eat. However, this ease comes at a price: about \$3-\$5 per-person per-meal. This works out to roughly \$12 per day – an expensive way to hike.

It is far cheaper and usually tastier to re-package grocery-store foods and do minimal cooking for groups of 4 to 8 people. You'll pool cooking gear, and cut down on waste and often weight as well. Below are some cooking tips and sample menus and grocery lists:

Tips: None of these tips are hard and fast rules, but guidelines. For example, I'll add a small can of meat (or better yet, the newer foil packs) to flavor a pasta dish, but wouldn't even consider of bringing a couple of cans of stew.

Select foods that store and pack well without refrigeration

- Dried pastas, instant soups, cereals, rice, pancake mix, etc.
- Dried fruits (cherries, cranberries, raisins, etc.)
- Clarified butter, or clear cooking oil will pack even in the summer.
- Avoid canned goods and foods that make a mess (syrup).
- Learn how to use dried spices and herbs to flavor things up so they aren't bland. I won't go backpacking without curry powder, Cajun seasoning, garlic (powdered if you must), oregano and rosemary.
- Repackage foods for durability and ease of use. Add required dried ingredients at home, package things in ziplock bags, and cut out cooking instructions from boxed items.
- Individual serving packages from fast foods are great for condiments.
- Film cans, washed and dried, can be used to store small quantities of liquids.

Select foods (or plan your recipes) for foods that cook fast in a minimum of water.

- Angle hair pasta cooks in 3 minutes, regular spaghetti in 7, some types of macaroni in 10 minutes or more. You'll save lots of fuel (weight) and time if you use angel hair.
- Did you know that the only difference between cook-on-the-stove oatmeal and "instant" oatmeal is how fine the oats are cut? This same rule applies to almost all cooking. For example, sun-dried tomatoes usually need to be soaked for a half-hour or so before use. But if you powder them in a food processor at home, they'll cook up into a sauce in a matter of minutes.
- Pasta is usually cooked in lots of extra water (which you then pour out on the ground). You can cook it in just enough water to cover IF you are willing to stir it constantly while on the stove. You get to purify less water, use a smaller, lighter pan, and generally reduce weight and waste.

Plan your cooking for a single burner:

- Cook foods first that will "hold", then cook foods that need to be served fresh off the stove.
- Foods will continue to cook off the stove. For example, if you bring water to a boil, add angle hair pasta, and return to a boil, you can then take the pot off the stove and let it stand for 5 to 7 minutes, and it will be a thoroughly cooked as if you had boiled it for 3 minutes (don't forget to stir!)
- One-pot meals that include carbs, protein, and some vegetables, minimize cleanup

Here are meal ideas for four people (prices out to about \$5/person):

Breakfast idea 1: Pancakes with hot fruit topping & breakfast drink:

Complete pancake mix for 12-16 pancakes.

Hot fruit topping: 1 1/2 cup dried cherries, sprinkled at home with 1/4 tsp of vanilla extract, 1 cup sugar, 1/2 tsp corn starch

Oil for cooking the pancakes

Orange drink to make 2 quarts, packaged in single-quart units (zip-lock bags)

(see fruit topping instructions below)

Breakfast idea 2: Granola bars and raisins with hot chocolate

4 commercial or similar home-made granola bars per-person.

Bag of raisins or other dried fruit (about 20 oz for 8 people)

Hot cocoa: two packets per person

Breakfast idea 3: Oatmeal w/ dried fruit & hot cocoa.

2-3 packets of instant oatmeal per person. Flavor it up with brown sugar, cinnamon, nutmeg, vanilla extract, banana chips, raisins, dried pineapple, dried cherries, etc. Include 2 packets hot cocoa per person.

Trail lunch ideas:

These should be quick, no-cook lunches. Trail breads with peanut butter and jelly or summer sausage with cheese and crackers are classic choices. If the weather is cold, perhaps add some dried cup-o-soup packets.

Dinner 1: Angle-hair pasta in a dried-tomato herb sauce & lemonade (even using expensive dried tomatoes, this costs less than half the cost of freeze dried spaghetti).

1 lb angel hair pasta, broken into 2" pieces.

1 1/2 quarts water

1/2 cup Parmesan cheese in a ziplock.

2 quarts lemonade mix packaged in 1 quart units for a beverage.

Sauce concentrate, prepared as described below.

Homemade sauce concentrate:

3 oz, dried tomatoes, powdered in a food processor (see below).

1 1/2 TBS oregano, 1/2 tsp rosemary, 1/2 tsp black pepper

3 TBS onion flakes, 1/4 tsp ground coriander, 1/4 tsp garlic powder

1/4 cup olive oil, 2 TBS sherry or cooking wine, 2 TBS vinegar

1 tsp salt

Dried tomatoes are tough. You need to rough chop them with a knife before you put them in the food processor, add the spices, oil, sherry and vinegar. Store in a double-ziplock to prevent leaks. The alcohol in the sherry keeps things from rotting, and helps the spices release their flavor.

To cook the spaghetti, bring the water to a boil then lower the heat to a simmer, add the pasta and sauce concentrate, and stir constantly (if you stop stirring, it will burn). As the pasta cooks and the tomatoes rehydrate, the water will go away. Remove from heat and serve, topped with:

Dinner 2: Macaroni & cheese with chicken & spices, pita bread, & stewed apple dessert.

2 boxes macaroni & cheese, 1 tin of chicken white meat, dried milk & oil as required by mac & cheese instructions, also spices to taste (I like rosemary and onion flakes with this one).

See fruit instructions below.

Dinner 3: Chicken hot-shots

Pita bread, 4 rounds, instant mashed potatoes (to make 2 cups/person), two envelopes chicken gravy mix, and three packs or cans of white chicken meat.

Potatoes: Add dried milk and butter to the mashed potato flakes at home per the instructions on the pack, so you can just add water at camp. Add the boiling water needed to make up the potatoes in a pot.

In a second pot, make up the gravy mix per the packet instructions. Add the chicken and juices and heat through.

Serve the potatoes over the pita, and top with chicken & gravy

See fruit instructions below.

Other dinners: Look over the pre-packaged convenience foods. Stove-top stuffing, pasta, rice & potato dishes all make great starting points. Doctor it up with some packaged/canned meat, real cheese, dried sauce, soup or gravy mix, and you can feed your patrol for 1/3 to 1/3 the cost of freeze-dried foods.

Cracker Barrel: Hard, sharp cheddar cheese & crackers (or hard tack – see below) with fruit drink. Trail mix (M&Ms, nuts and raisins or similar mix) is another alternative.

Instructions for fruit topping & stewed dried fruits

Syrup is great on pancakes, but it is a mess to pack. Dried fruits, cooked with sugar and a some spices makes a great fruit topping. The general rule of thumb is 1 1/2 cup fruit to 1-cup sugar, plus 1/2 tsp cornstarch (a thickener) and spices to taste. If you want stewed fruit for dessert, just add half as much sugar. Dump the dry stuff in a pot, just cover with water, and bring to a boil, stirring constantly. Add a little water if the fruit is soaking it up quickly. Once the fruit is to a boil, you can remove it from the heat and use the burner for your pancakes. For the spices, try vanilla with cherries, cinnamon and nutmeg with apples, cloves and allspice with peaches or apricots. Don't forget about raisins! A bit of cloves, cinnamon and a touch of cardamom, makes plain raisins into an exotic topping.