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Meal Prep Made Easy for the Busy LNC Kacee Leigh

What would your life be like if you could carve out a few extra hours every week, cut down on restaurant and takeout bills, and eat nutritionally rich food? Pat Iyer speaks with Kacee Leigh, nutritional expert, who lays out a time- and money-saving way to prepare several meals at once in an hour or less. This podcast could change how you live.

Learn

- Why bulk meal preparation is neither time-consuming nor expensive
- Specific suggestions for preparing varied meals
- How to accommodate special dietary needs
- How to plan so that you don't over-buy groceries
- The freedom of cooking without recipes

Pat: Hi, this is Pat Iyer with Legal Nurse Podcast and today I have a guest, Kacee Leigh, who's going to be talking with us about something that affects every one of us every day, how we handle our meal preparation in a busy life. You've got demands on your time as a business owner, as a clinical nurse, as a parent, as a child perhaps to elderly parents, and all of this can impact the way that you eat.

I met Kacee through a networking group that I'm involved with called "Women's Prosperity Network." And when she shared with me her expertise related to meal preparation and nutrition, I thought Kacee really needed to come on the show and talk with you to give you some tips to make this whole aspect of your daily living much easier.

Kacee, welcome to the show.

Kacee: Hi Pat, thank you so much for having me on. This is such an honor.

Pat: Tell me a little bit about your background and how you got involved in meal preparation. And I know you have other aspects of your expertise in addition to that, so can you tell us something about how you got there?

Kacee: Absolutely. I was an athlete my entire life. I signed a Division 1 athletic scholarship with Boise State. I did three years there where my time was taken by everything. I was training. I was going to school, trying to have a social life, traveling for competitions, making sure that I slept, and at the time I was also diagnosed with generalized anxiety disorder.

So, it was, "How am I going to take my power back and have something to help me control this and use it to my benefit in my life?"

And that really became my nutrition, and I worked with a nutritionist at the time. She became the most amazing person in my life because she taught me so much of what I now know and what I aspire to be. And so, I really got down to learning how to meal prep because you know as a college kid, you don't have a lot of money. You don't have a lot of time when you're a college athlete. And I had to eat good food so that I could fuel my body as an athlete and fuel my brain as a person and an academic. And so that really sparked this meal prep journey.

When I finished my Bachelor of Science and Kinesiology, I moved back to Phoenix. I moved in with my fiancé, and things changed again because I wanted to spend more time doing everything else. I wanted to spend more time with my clients. I went back to get a master's degree. I wanted to spend time with my fiancé and my adorable kitten.

All these things wanted to take my attention, but I still had to prioritize myself with food. And that's where I built the system that I now have for meal prepping of knowing what's in your kitchen, better grocery shopping to lower your grocery bill, easier meal prepping to save time and reduce food waste, and have really, really good food for the week. And that's what I teach my clients too because they have so much pulling on their time that they need to know that is taken care of, know that nutrition is taken care of, and they have something that's going to give them power and give them fuel to handle everything else that they want to do in their life.

Pat: Do you notice a difference in your body when you are eating the food that is fresh and highly nutritious versus eating the fast food convenient type of food?

Kacee: Absolutely. I like to talk about water as the biggest thing that makes that impact, especially when you're working out and you're running around, a sip of water is like lifegiving. That's the way nutrition is. It's supposed to be lifegiving. It's supposed to fuel your body with positive energy and fuel your brain. A lot of women, especially nurses that are so busy crazy taking care of their patients, they have brain fog because they don't have what's fueling them. And when they do have it, they notice that brain fog is completely different, that it's almost nonexistent.

Pat: If you're working in a clinical environment there is often a variety of unhealthy food sitting around. Candy is given to the nurses by grateful families. Doughnuts, bagels, high sugar or high salt food are always present in a break room, for example, for people who are going in, perhaps not being able to get to the cafeteria for a meal, but who run into the break room and grab a doughnut and eat that instead.

Kacee: Yeah, absolutely. And I remember when my grandma was in the hospital with dementia and she broke her hip and it was a very, very hard time for my family. And I remember seeing the nurses and how tired they were and running around. And some of them would have doughnuts in their hand, and that breaks my heart too because they're taking care of everyone else.

As a nurse, you're taking care of everyone, but nobody is taking care of you. And I can't agree more that it's so much easier to run to the break room and grab a doughnut than it is to have an apple in your bag or maybe you aren't able to get to your bag or there's no microwave to heat up your meal prep food. And so, we must adjust in those circumstances because there is something that is going to work with your schedule and work with your life.

Pat: Let's talk about the meal prep process itself. And I think one of the things that I want to ask you that I'm sure you encounter some misconceptions or some myths about meal prep. Can you explore the kinds of things that you've heard from people when you start talking about meal prep?

Kacee: Absolutely. The two biggest examples that I can think of right off the top of my head are, first, that meal prepping is too tedious. A lot of people think it takes a lot of ingredients, it takes a lot of time, it takes a lot of effort, a lot of effort in your kitchen of what's being turned on. A lot of people like to turn everything on in the kitchen, and that's a lot.

The other one is that healthy eating is too expensive, and that is such a myth. The number one reason why people say that is because of food waste. That healthy food when they buy it, they're excited, they're motivated, they want to eat it, but then it goes bad quickly. It goes bad faster than the processed food, the chips, the crackers, everything that lasts in our pantry until we eat it. So, in that perspective if we're eating the healthy food that we get and using it and utilizing it in meal prep, it's easier to then say, "Okay, eating healthy is beneficial to my budget. It is much easier to handle that way now that I'm not having to eat the processed foods or eat out more or do all of those things that make it really expensive for us."

Pat: Yes, it's very expensive to eat out. And then the typical plate that is served in a restaurant is usually enough to feed two people, if not three or four meals. My husband and I are primarily vegetarian, but we'll eat meat when we go out, usually chicken or shrimp. I'm always amazed when I look at the size of a piece of chicken that comes in a restaurant, and I think the typical serving size is supposed to be the size of a deck of cards, if I'm not mistaken. And I look at this piece and it's probably usually got two pieces, two servings out of one piece, and then there's another piece of chicken next to it that's the same size. So, it's technically four servings on one plate. And if you sit there and you eat it all, you're a pig. You feel like a pig.

Kacee: You feel like it, certainly. I've heard it all my life. I've heard other people say it but cut your portions in half right away when you sit down and have your meal at a restaurant. And that way you know that's being taken home, and you have a complete other meal. That's saving money, too, because we're going to be full from that half of plate, but we're also going to have something to be able to take home or take to work or whatever else you use your leftovers for.

Pat: I've heard people talk about spending time on the weekend doing meal prep for the week. Can you tell us what that typically would look like?

Kacee: The first thing I do want to mention is meal prep doesn't have to be Sunday. On Facebook you see all the meal prep Sundays and all the beautiful pictures, and it doesn't have to be that way. You know if Wednesday is your day off, you take the kids to school and you know you have the house to yourself, Wednesday is your meal prep day. You know it's whatever works best in your schedule, whatever works best for your family.

In terms of the system, it comes down to limiting the number of ingredients that you're using while maximizing the amount that you can mix and match. What I mean by that is I made chicken this past weekend for my meal prep. I made chicken, roasted potatoes, a bunch of vegetables, some rice, and I can mix and match all of that. And then you change the seasonings and the spices to make it easier. I made about 10 meals in an hour because I was able to mix and match the chicken, the potatoes, the rice, all the veggies that I made and then let my fiancé pick what sauces that he was going to throw on it. And that brings him into the process too that he can still choose the taste that he wants, the flavor that he wants while turning what's already made into something else.

Pat: Can you take us through that process a little bit more in-depth? I'm intrigued by the idea of making 10 meals at one time, and you've mentioned sauces. Tell us about the sauces, like how would you assemble those ingredients to make things that were different?

Kacee: Absolutely. So, one of my biggest rules is to keep it simple and the other rule is to have multiple things going on at once. And that sounds like very, very contradictory rules, but they absolutely make sense in the process.

What I mean by keep it simple is the recipes. I don't work off recipes. I don't teach my clients recipes. I don't post recipes because recipes to me imply

1. That I'm a cook and I'm not, I'm a meal prepper.
2. That it must be complicated, that it must take a ton of ingredients. It must take a ton of time and it must be that restaurant perfect and it doesn't have to be.

And then when I talk about having multiple things going on at once, I'm talking about our appliances in our kitchen. If I turn on the oven, how much can I put in the oven at once? I can put a huge pan of chicken in, have five or six chicken breasts cooking at once. I can have a sheet pan of roasted vegetables and have all of that going on at once. I can have another glass pan of potatoes. I had roasted potatoes this week. And that all goes in the oven.

It takes about the same time. You know maybe a little bit less for the potatoes and a little bit more for the chicken depending on what you're making. If you're roasting or if you're cooking, depending on how big your chicken breasts are. But all of that can be five or six meals right there and it all goes in the oven. And you can leave it alone and that's such a beautiful thing to me. And then if we have the stove on and we're making rice, we can put the rice on and leave it and go do something else, go chop vegetables.

Another thing when I talk about keeping it simple is using frozen vegetables. The reason why I can limit it to an hour is because I limit the amount of chopping that I do. I don't spend a lot of time chopping vegetables because I typically use frozen vegetables. And you know we talk about nutritional value. There's only slightly less nutritional value in frozen vegetables than there is in fresh vegetables and that's because of flash frozen vegetables. They hold in the nutrients and they don't go bad as fast.

There's another misconception of, "Eating healthy is expensive." If you're buying frozen vegetables, they can be in your freezer for several weeks until you're ready to use them. When you are, cut the bag open, put it on a sheet pan, a little bit of olive oil, salt, and pepper. I use cayenne because I'm in Arizona, so we like a little bit of spice to everything. And then just put it in the oven, leave it alone for 45 minutes, and you have amazing roasted vegetables.

It's all about simplicity and knowing how to use your appliances effectively so that you don't have controlled chaos in the kitchen or real chaos, even worse.

Pat: Interesting. The idea of not following recipes is a radical concept for me. I went through a point in my life where I wanted to experiment with new recipes. And I didn't cook the same thing two nights in a

row or repeat any recipe for about four or five years. So, for four or five years I was cooking something new every time I was sitting down to make dinner. And what I discovered is that I developed a preference for things that didn't have a lot of ingredients and didn't require me to be standing a lot of the time, that I gravitated more to recipes that were simpler and cookbooks that are simpler.

Because my husband has kidney disease, we are very focused on limiting sodium. And because he's diabetic, we must limit the carbs and we must limit the sugars. So, I like recipe books that spell out the nutritional ingredients. Not every recipe book does that. And I look for things that I can start and then walk away as you're describing, and it's cooking while I'm doing other things.

Kacee: Absolutely. And that makes it much more effective, and it makes it more enjoyable. That is amazing that you cooked a different recipe every single time you sat down. That's incredible because you're trying so many things, which I think is something that has changed as well. We kind of get into the idea of what our food is. We use the terms "picky eaters" for those who limit the amount of food they're willing to try. That's something that meal prepping allows some freedom in as well. We're able to switch out ingredients. We're able to try a new combination, a new sauce.

Looking at sauces, the low sodium sauces are now available, and we can really pick and choose those. And we don't have to be all one thing as well. We don't have to have all the elaborate recipes or cook something different every night. We can absolutely do that, and we can absolutely be a master meal prepper as well, and we don't have to be one thing.

Some weeks I prep a lot less than other weeks because it's less busy or my fiancé needs less meals or I need less meals. We'll cook a little bit more, but some weeks are insanely busy. This week we're running around having meetings, and I must go up to Glendale right after this interview, and there's not time. So, meal prepping gives us time. And I think that's an incredible part too.

Pat: And then I assume you're putting these various meals in containers and you're freezing them for the week?

Kacee: I put them all in the fridge. I keep my fridge relatively low in temperature, so it saves a little bit better. If you're going more than I'd say five to six days of meal prepping, I would recommend putting them in containers and freezing them because they will stay better.

When you're looking at containers, you want to look at the purpose of them. So, the containers that I always buy, whether from Amazon or at Walmart, are BPA-free, microwave- and dishwasher-safe. If you're looking for freezer-safe, you want to specifically look for ones that are tight sealing and preferably plastic over glass because of the shattering risk. I have one shelf in my fridge that is only meal prepping. The only thing that goes on that shelf is prepped meals. So, I want to make sure that the containers that I have are long, deep, but also thin so that I can stack them. The ones that I have now, I can stack three high in my fridge on that one shelf. And it's all contained, which is the organizational side of my brain that I want everything to be organized and everything to have its place.

Pat: So, in the example then that you shared with us earlier of getting 10 meals together with chicken and rice and potatoes and vegetables. When you're creating those meals, are you taking that combination of four ingredients, chicken, potatoes, rice, and vegetables and then dividing them up in different proportions or different types of vegetables to create those meals?

Kacee: Yeah, and it's interesting that you mentioned dividing it up too because there are two different types of prepping. There is meal prepping where you're dividing it into individual containers so that you can just grab and take them with you. And then there's also bulk prepping, so you can make a lot of everything. A lot of chicken, a lot of rice, a lot of potatoes, a lot of vegetables, and put them in bigger containers. So, there's only potatoes in one, there's only chicken in another, and that's called bulk prepping.

And that's more for people that are at home more, families that want to spend time at the dinner table, which is amazing. They can just pull out all those bulk containers and everyone can make their own plate. And that's amazing, especially when you have picky eaters or you have dietary restrictions, or you're trying to make something a little bit easier for someone else in terms of the sodium and the carbs. And you know everyone can make their own plate and get what they want.

Going back to your question, it allows you some freedom in prepping that you can make the meals. And even if you do bulk prepping, somebody who needs to take a meal with them can still make their own plate out of those bulk containers and take it with them. And so, there's a lot of flexibility of putting things together.

In terms of when you are meal prepping, when you're doing the cooking part, I pick categories and I go off what's already in my kitchen. So, part of my system is having a kitchen inventory, which is everything that's in your kitchen. And then asking yourself, "What can I make out of what's already in my kitchen?" and that decreases food waste too.

If we already have everything for our meal prep, maybe we don't need to go grocery shopping that week. And for our budget, that's \$50 saved. It's those little things that if you don't know what's in your kitchen, what's fully in your kitchen, you're going to go buy it again. And you're going to have a big grocery list again because you don't know what's already in your kitchen. So, when I looked at meal prepping this week, I had a lot of bell peppers from last week. I wanted to use them up. I had rice still. I had chicken still. We got potatoes because it's something different. It's changing out an ingredient.

So, it really allows the flexibility of not using a recipe and kind of saying, "What do I already have, what can I make out of it, and then what little things can I adjust and maybe get at the grocery store to make it different?"

Pat: And, you're making me think about the times that you've got fresh vegetables in your refrigerator and you may not be able to incorporate them in recipes. Like, for example, I'm driving tomorrow to Orlando to attend a four-day conference and by the time I come back the peppers and the celery and the cauliflower that are in the refrigerator are not going to be at their peak of freshness anymore.

Because of my husband's sodium restrictions, I've been reading labels very carefully and discovering that in broth, which is a wonderful foundation for the crockpot, much of the broth that's on the shelves is high in sodium. Even the ones that are labeled lower sodium may have more sodium in them than another brand, whether it's chicken or

vegetable. So, I've been chopping up vegetables, adding several cups of water and a couple of bay leaves, and letting those vegetables simmer in the crockpot for five or six hours to make my own broth. It has no sodium and no chemicals and no preservatives, and by the way tastes a whole lot better than the machine-made broths.

Kacee: I love that.

Pat: Yeah, so now you're inspiring me. I think I need to do some cutting up and freezing before I leave the house tomorrow.

Kacee: Yes, absolutely. I was talking to another coach the other day, and we were talking about food waste and how we can prevent it even more. And she talked about in her freezer she has a big container for all the miscellaneous vegetable scraps that aren't eaten and might go bad. She throws them in there. And it has all different seasonings from different foods, and she makes a vegetable soup out of that. And I thought that was the most genius thing of something so simple to limit our food waste.

Pat: And with the homemade broth that I'm talking to you about, the one step further that I took was that once I finished cooking the broth, I had all these pieces of vegetables floating in the water. I strained out the broth and then I put the vegetables with some of the broth into a blender and made that as a pureed soup that we had for dinner.

Kacee: Delicious. That sounds so good right now, absolutely. And that's an amazing thing about our food right now too is we are getting more focused on food labels, and we are getting more focused on eating foods that don't have food labels. When we eat food that doesn't have food labels, and I'm talking about vegetables. I'm talking about fruits, to a certain extent our poultry and our meat, to a certain extent it's getting blurred there. But when we eat foods that don't have food labels, we are overall healthier.

Pat: And I think the realization that we get, Kacee, is that if you've been eating fast food and chemical-laden food for many years, and you switch over to a fresher taste, it takes a while but you can feel differences in your body. If you're used to a low-fat diet and then you go out and eat a big piece of pizza, which I grew up eating in New Jersey. We've got a lot of wonderful pizza places in New Jersey that

produce pizza that's laden with oil. You must learn how to blot your pizza with a napkin before you eat it and fold it up by the end into a triangle because it's going to drip oil on your clothing. And you eat it and then an hour later your stomach is going, "What did you just do to me?"

Kacee: Yeah, absolutely.

Pat: You don't get that reaction from eating a bell pepper for sure.

Kacee: No and I've talked to a lot of coaches who switched too. The plant-based diet is a huge thing right now and there's a lot of merit behind it. And they talk about there's no hangover in it. So, some of these diets that are out, paleo and keto, they come with things called the "Keto Flu" and different adaptation periods. But the research is showing that there is no hangover in the plant-based diet. It's just flicking over to the plant-based diet because it really is filling your body.

And I say that as a guilt-free coach, I really work with ladies who want to be guilt-free with their food and that's a huge thing. It doesn't mean that you can't have that deliciously greasy slice of pizza or you know the three tacos that you really want on Taco Tuesday. I'm talking about here in Arizona. We're all about the Mexican food, but it doesn't mean that we can't eat those things. It means that we eat those things in terms of our goals. If eating that slice of pizza and enjoying it and loving it as a part of our goals today, absolutely do it and love the grease.

You know maybe we don't feel as good, but that reminds us too of our goals, of how we want to feel, of the sleep that we want to have, of the energy that we want to give to our families. Eating those things may taste good and we may enjoy it, but they're also going to give us a reminder of what our goals are.

Pat: And speaking of pizza, it's something else that is a different aspect of this, the fact that a lot of people have food allergies and can't tolerate some of the food that we are serving.

This is a slight sideway comment. I met a woman at the National Speakers Association Winter Conference this weekend who has a background as a meeting planner. And she points out that as we think about diversity, if you have a staff meeting and you serve pepperoni

pizza to everybody who's sitting there captive for lunch, if you eliminate the gluten-free people, if you eliminate the vegetarians, if you eliminate the Muslims who don't want to eat pepperoni, you'd probably eliminate one or two other people in that group. And we're not respecting the fact that if we had given them another choice that would include everybody's taste and needs, we would be far more respectful of people's individual needs.

Kacee: Absolutely. And we don't have dairy in our house because my fiancé is lactose intolerant. So, we have no dairy in this house and every time that we think of cooking a recipe and it maybe has milk or heavy cream, I always think of how there has been no better time in history to have a food allergy because we have so many alternatives in our food. I can go to Sprouts and get dairy-free cream cheese, which is an incredible thing. So, I can still make the buffalo chicken dip that he wants, making it dairy-free and I think that is incredible.

When we talk about celiac disease, there are so many options for gluten-free now. I mean, we have almond flour or cashew flour. We have all these different varieties of food. There is no better time in history to have a food allergy.

Pat: You're right. You know in the past the idea that somebody couldn't have a wheat-based product would mean that they would have no choice, but now there's all kinds of gluten-free options sitting on the shelves. And for people who are vegan who don't want to eat animal products, there are lots of choices.

Kacee: Absolutely. And it's incredible that you don't have to sacrifice food that you want, and you don't have to sacrifice flavor because of it.

Pat: Which is what it's all about isn't it, to be able to eat tasty, healthy food that is easy to prepare and can be prepared ahead of time, so they're not rushing around 10 minutes before it's time to sit down for dinner saying, "What are we going to have for dinner tonight?"

Kacee: Or the opposite saying, "Let's not cook tonight. We'll just go out to eat." It saves us that.

Pat: Or in our case what I typically do is cook more than my husband and I can consume in a meal and then open up those containers and label

them with what it is, the date, the number of servings, and off it goes into the freezer.

Kacee: Absolutely. And that's a phenomenal way to do it. You know a lot of people start their meal prep journey with leftovers. They make more than they can eat for that night and those leftovers become their prepped meals. And it evolves from there, and I think that's beautiful as well.

Pat: You've shared a lot with us in this last 30 minutes and I appreciate so much the inspiration that you've given our listeners. Can you tell them how they can find out more about you and the services that you offer?

Kacee: Absolutely. So, everything is Kacee Fitness. It's K-A-C-E-E. Kacee Fitness on Facebook and Instagram. Our website is kaceefitness.com. The meal prep guide is in there. It's a free guide that I give with my top tips and my templates. It comes with a recipe that I use. From there, you can also see that the *Becoming a Meal Prep Master* book is out now, as well as any fitness instructions that I have on the website.

Pat: Perfect. Well, thank you, Kacee, so much for being part of the show.

Kacee: Thank you so much, it's been a pleasure.

Pat: I know that you've inspired our listeners. You've certainly inspired me. I think I'm going to be looking for those... Did you call it BP-free...? What was the...?

Kacee: BPA-free.

Pat: BPA-free?

Kacee: Yes.

Pat: Tell us about that?

Kacee: Yeah, so most containers are BPA-free. It just means that if they're not BPA-free the plastic may not melt but kind of seep in the chemicals into your food. So, the BPA-free protects that.

Pat: That certainly sounds like something that's worthwhile.

Kacee: Most containers are BPA-free nowadays, but it's always good to look at that checkmark.

Pat: All right, I'm going to be looking into that aspect. I think you've inspired me also to think of creative ways of making more meals, chopping up more fresh vegetables and freezing them at the times that you know that you're not going to be able to use them, or they're going to reach their end-life pretty quickly. And, also, taking advantage of the quality of frozen vegetables, which are flash frozen and at their peak at the time that you are getting them at the store, so your nutritional value is far better.

And then if you must use canned vegetables, which we didn't talk about in this show, but canned tomatoes and canned beans are options, but please no canned peas, no canned corn. My sister and I were tortured by my mother growing up with canned peas to the point that we had to beg her, "Please don't make us eat those anymore." And she finally listened to us, but I remember that as one of my childhood traumas. Those things are just not good.

Kacee: Mine was canned green beans. My mom now makes fresh green beans and they're amazing, but I ate a lot of canned green beans as a kid.

Pat: Yes, yes, I had my share of those as well.

Thank you so much, Kacee, and thank you to you the listener who's been coming along on this journey. I hope it's been inspiring for you. I know that you could be in anyone of 77 countries in the world who are listening to this podcast, and your food prep and concepts and menus can be dramatically different. But I think the principles are the same whether you're making food in Mexico or India or Australia or Canada or England or Germany or many of the other countries around the world who are listening to the show. Keep the principles in mind and I hope that this has been useful for you.

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