

Meal Kits: Are They Worth It?

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There is high demand for convenience in our society. As a result, meal kit services have become increasingly popular. These meal kits are mailed directly to your front door each week. These kits include recipes and pre-measured ingredients ready to be used right away. Some of the most popular services include BlueApron, HelloFresh, and Plated. Since their beginning in 2012, meal kit services have grown into a \$2.2-billion-dollar industry. There are more than 100 companies in the United States providing meal-kit services.

You may have seen an ad on TV or social media, received a flyer in the mail, or know someone who has tried them. Regardless, meal kit services are everywhere. Surprisingly, 1 in 5 U.S. adults has tried a meal-kit service. In a survey of more than 2,000 U.S. adults, about 39 percent have tried a service for a minimum of one week. Only 4 percent of those surveyed had used the service for over a year.

These delivery services promise ease, convenience, and time savings for you and your family. With the use of meal kits, the need to grocery shop and meal

plan is gone. It is still necessary to spend time preparing the meal. On average, the preparation and cook time for meals in these kits is between 30-60 minutes. This does not include the time necessary to sit down and enjoy the meal.

Little research exists on the use of meal-kit delivery services. Some experts have begun to break down the benefits and drawbacks of the services. This information may help consumers decide if they are a good fit for their lifestyle.

Benefits

Variety. Eating a variety of foods, especially fresh produce, is a great way to receive all the nutrients the body needs to work. For many people, the recipes provided in the meal-kit delivery services increase the variety of vegetables, whole grains, and lean protein consumed. It allows individuals to try new foods, cooking styles, and food preparation methods they may not purchase or use on their own.



Portion control. With meal delivery kits, customers choose how many meals they would like and for how many people each week. When ingredients are shipped, they come in specific amounts for the exact number of servings needed. The pre-measured and pre-portioned food at each meal may help people with portion control.

Food waste. When preparing a homemade dish, some recipes may call for a small amount of an ingredient that can only be purchased in a larger quantity or size. For example, a recipe may call for half of an onion, which means you may end up wasting the other half. With meal-kit delivery services, ingredients are pre-measured for the recipe included. As a result, no ingredients are left over that could be wasted.

Family mealtime. Researchers have shown that parents were more likely to establish family mealtime if they received help in planning, designing, and preparing meals. In the same study, it was reported that families ate healthier meals when the recipes and ingredients were provided and they experienced improvements in their family communication.

Drawbacks

Healthfulness. The word “fresh” is commonly used to describe meal options with delivery services. Many people will assume the word “fresh” means the meal is healthy. That is not always the case. Although meals may boost the variety of foods in the diet, little nutrition information is provided with meal options outside of the calorie count. In addition, a common ingredient used is salt.

Some entrees include up to 50 percent of your daily intake for sodium. Individuals over the age of 50 and at risk for heart disease and high blood pressure should be cautious about the amount of salt used in the provided recipes.

Packaging waste. Meal kits include approximately 30 pieces of plastic and cardboard for safe delivery of food items. This packaging is required to keep foods cold and safe to eat when they arrive. Some individuals are opposed to so much packaging waste and the negative impact that could have on the environment. Some meal kit services may provide information on their website for recycling packaging materials.

Cost. The most commonly mentioned drawback of meal delivery kits is the cost. On average, the cost per meal per person from a delivery service is \$10 to \$11 dollars. At this rate, three meals a week for two people would cost approximately \$60 dollars. This cost may be less expensive than dining out at sit down restaurants each time, but is more expensive than grocery shopping and building homemade meals on your own. It should be considered that some companies offer heavy discounts upon initial sign-up to bring in new customers, but those discounts typically do not last.

See the Cost Comparison table (Table 1) as an example of the cost of purchasing just the ingredients for the recipe at the grocery store versus the meal-kit delivery service.



Table 1. Cost Comparison: Traditional meal-kit delivery service vs. groceries.

Honey mustard-glazed chicken with roasted sweet potato wedges and slaw, 2 servings			
Ingredient	Recipe amount	Recipe amount price*	Package price*
Boneless, skinless chicken thighs	2	\$2.06	\$5.15 / 5 thighs
Carrots	6 oz	\$0.37	\$1.95 / 32 oz
Sweet potatoes	2	\$1.74	\$0.87 each
Cabbage	½ lb	\$0.25	\$0.49 / 1 lb
Mayonnaise	3 Tbsp	\$0.18	\$1.79 / 15 oz
Dijon mustard	1 Tbsp	\$0.04	\$0.99 / 12 oz
Sugar	1 Tbsp	\$0.01	\$1.99 / 4 lb
Apple cider vinegar	2 Tbsp	\$0.07	\$1.19 / 16 oz
Honey	1 Tbsp	\$0.14	\$3.29 / 12 oz
	Grocery price**	\$4.86	\$18.58
	Meal-kit price (\$9.99/serving)	\$19.98	

*Recipe amount prices were calculated using the package price divided by the recipe amount price required for this specific recipe

**All grocery prices were determined using store-brand items.

Other Considerations

Meal-kit delivery services may or may not be a good fit for your family. When deciding whether to try meal delivery kits, there are other considerations to keep in mind when making your decision.

- Meal-kit delivery service providers use online platforms to select meals and place weekly orders. A reliable internet connection is required through either a computer, smartphone, or tablet to manage accounts.
- It is important that those who are eating the meal like to be adventurous. Many recipes included in meal kits may include new ingredients or foods. When purchasing for an entire family, keep in mind picky eaters such as young children may not enjoy being exposed to new foods on a regular basis.
- Many people have a personal dietary preference or diet-related health condition (for example, gluten-free for celiac disease). There are meal-kit

delivery services that provide options compliant with almost all common dietary restrictions.

- Grocery stores are recognizing the appeal of meal-kit delivery services and are jumping in on the game. Many larger stores have ingredients bundled for meals that simply need to be taken home and prepared. Typically, these meals come at a much greater cost than purchasing ingredients separately throughout the store.

Useful Tips

Below is a list of useful tips and final thoughts for meal-kit delivery services.

- There may be value in using meal kits as a “cooking school” for trying new foods and learning food-related skills. They could be a temporary option to learn new recipes and to add variety to your diet if your meal planning is in a rut.
- Meal kits may be appropriate during times of transition for an individual or family when less time can be devoted to meal planning and shopping, such as welcoming a new baby home, transitioning home from a temporary rehabilitation facility, or when a family is managing a crisis.

- Some meal-kit services allow you to specify delivery instructions. For example, those who live in an apartment may request to have food delivered to their front door rather than dropped off at the apartment complex office or manager's office.
- If the cost is feasible for your family and lifestyle, make sure you are saving time with grocery shopping and meal planning and truly adding value with convenience to make it worth the financial investment.
- Find someone who has used a meal kit and ask about his or her experience.
- Split an order from a meal-kit delivery service with another family to learn about the ordering process.

If you are unable to fit meal delivery kits into your lifestyle, look for ways to invest time into meal planning, grocery shopping, and meal preparation on your own. Visit your local Cooperative Extension Office for healthy recipes and tips for grocery shopping and meal preparation.

Resources

Iowa State University Extension and Outreach, Spend Smart, Eat Smart. <https://spendsmart.extension.iastate.edu/>.

References

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