BCBA Freezer Dinner Guide

Decrease response effort for the nights you get home late

Why a freezer guide in a hormones CEU?
On a packed week, the hardest part of eating well isn't knowing what to eat. It's having something ready when you walk in the door at 7 p.m. A freezer full of balanced dinners is **decrease response effort** in its most practical form: the behavior you want (a real dinner) takes less work than the one you don't (chips over the sink, or skipping dinner and grazing at 9 p.m.).

Start with two. You don't need to fill your freezer this weekend. Pick two recipes, make them once, and see how it goes. That's shaping. Add a third when two feels routine.

Three ways to freeze a dinner

Style	What it is	Best for
Dump bag	Raw protein, sauce, and seasoning sealed in a bag. Thaw, then cook.	Chicken, slow cooker or pressure cooker meals, sheet-pan dinners
Cook and freeze	Fully cooked, cooled, portioned, frozen. Reheat and eat.	Soups, chili, meatballs, breakfast burritos
Components	Cooked pieces you mix and match: shredded chicken, rice, meatballs.	Bowls, wraps, salads, lunches

Build a balanced freezer dinner

Same rule as the worksheet: protein, fat, fiber, and carbs. Carbs are kindling. Protein, fat, and fiber are the logs. Every recipe here is built around a protein, and the "serve with" line fills in the rest.

Protein (the anchor)	Fiber (vegetables, beans)	Fat	Carb
Chicken thighs or breast, ground turkey or beef, chicken sausage, eggs, lentils, beans	Frozen broccoli, green beans, peppers, spinach, bagged salad, black beans, lentils	Avocado, cheese, olive oil, nuts, Greek yogurt or sour cream	Microwave rice, tortillas, potatoes, pasta, sweet potato, fruit

Freezer basics (food safety)

Freeze	Keep your freezer at 0°F. Cool cooked food quickly (within 2 hours) in shallow containers before freezing. Freeze bags flat so they stack and thaw faster.
Label	Name, date, thaw and cook instructions, and "serve with." Future you, at 7 p.m., won't remember.
Quality	Frozen food stays safe at 0°F, but quality fades. Aim to eat cooked soups, chili, and casseroles within about 2 to 3 months, and raw dump bags within about 3 to 4 months.
Thaw	In the refrigerator overnight (most bags need about 24 hours), in cold water changed every 30 minutes, or in the microwave if you're cooking right away. Never on the counter.
Slow cooker	Thaw meat completely before it goes in a slow cooker. A pressure cooker or the oven can handle frozen; add cooking time.
Cook to	165°F for poultry and reheated leftovers. 160°F for ground beef and pork. A $10 instant-read thermometer takes the guessing out.

Food safety guidance follows the USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service (fsis.usda.gov) and FoodSafety.gov.

Six dinners and a breakfast

1. Turkey, Black Bean, and Sweet Potato Chili

Cook and freeze · makes about 6 servings

Ingredients
· 1½ lb ground turkey
· 1 onion, diced
· 2 bell peppers, diced
· 1 medium sweet potato, peeled and diced small
· 2 cans (15 oz) black beans, rinsed
· 1 can (28 oz) diced tomatoes
· 1 cup broth
· 2 Tbsp chili powder, 2 tsp cumin, 1 tsp salt

Prep day
Brown the turkey with the onion and peppers. Add everything else, simmer 30 to 35 minutes until the sweet potato is tender. Cool, then freeze in 2-serving containers or flat bags.

Cook night
Thaw overnight, or reheat from frozen on the stove or in the microwave, stirring, until it reaches 165°F.

Serve with
Avocado, shredded cheese, plain Greek yogurt, and a handful of tortilla chips or a piece of cornbread.

2. Salsa Verde Chicken

Dump bag · makes about 6 servings

Ingredients
· 2 lb boneless chicken thighs or breasts
· 1 jar (16 oz) salsa verde
· 1 onion, sliced
· 1 tsp cumin, ½ tsp salt

Prep day
Put everything in a gallon freezer bag, press out the air, freeze flat.

Cook night
Thaw overnight. Slow cooker on low 6 hours, or pressure cooker 15 minutes on high with a natural release. Shred.

Serve with
Microwave rice or tortillas, black beans, shredded lettuce, cheese, and avocado. Leftovers make work lunches.

3. Honey Garlic Chicken Thighs

Dump bag · makes about 5 servings

Ingredients
· 2 lb boneless chicken thighs
· 1/3 cup soy sauce or tamari
· 3 Tbsp honey
· 4 garlic cloves, minced
· 1 Tbsp grated ginger
· 1 Tbsp rice vinegar

Prep day
Whisk the sauce, add the chicken to a freezer bag, pour the sauce over, freeze flat.

Cook night
Thaw overnight. Bake on a lined sheet pan at 400°F for 25 to 30 minutes, to 165°F. Add a bag of frozen broccoli to the pan for the last 15 minutes.

Serve with
Microwave rice and the roasted broccoli. Sprinkle with sesame seeds.

4. Beef and Veggie Meatballs

Cook and freeze · makes about 40 meatballs

Ingredients
· 2 lb lean ground beef or ground turkey
· 2 eggs
· ½ cup oats or breadcrumbs
· 1 cup grated zucchini, squeezed dry
· ½ cup grated parmesan
· 3 garlic cloves, minced
· 2 tsp Italian seasoning, 1 tsp salt

Prep day
Mix gently, roll into 1½-inch balls, bake at 400°F for 18 to 20 minutes (160°F for beef, 165°F for turkey). Cool, freeze on a sheet pan for an hour, then move to a bag so they don't stick together.

Cook night
Simmer from frozen in a jar of marinara for 15 to 20 minutes, or microwave a portion until hot.

Serve with
Pasta or spaghetti squash, and a bagged salad. Or tuck into a sub roll with cheese.

5. Lentil, Sausage, and Kale Soup

Cook and freeze · makes about 8 servings

Ingredients
· 1 lb cooked chicken sausage, sliced
· 1 onion, 2 carrots, 2 celery stalks, diced
· 1½ cups dry lentils, rinsed
· 1 can (15 oz) diced tomatoes
· 8 cups broth
· 2 tsp Italian seasoning
· 3 cups chopped kale

Prep day
Brown the sausage and vegetables. Add the lentils, tomatoes, broth, and seasoning, simmer 30 minutes. Stir in the kale for the last 5. Cool and freeze in 2-serving containers.

Cook night
Reheat from frozen on the stove, or thaw overnight and microwave, to 165°F. Add a splash of broth if it's thick.

Serve with
Crusty bread or crackers, and a sprinkle of parmesan.

6. Greek Lemon Chicken

Dump bag · makes about 5 servings

Ingredients
· 2 lb chicken breast or thighs, cut into chunks
· ¼ cup olive oil
· Juice of 1 lemon
· 3 garlic cloves, minced
· 2 tsp dried oregano, 1 tsp salt, ½ tsp pepper

Prep day
Combine in a freezer bag, press out the air, freeze flat.

Cook night
Thaw overnight. Cook in a skillet over medium-high heat 8 to 10 minutes, or bake at 425°F for 18 to 20 minutes, to 165°F.

Serve with
Microwave rice or pita, cucumber and tomatoes, and hummus or tzatziki.

Bonus: Breakfast Burritos

Cook and freeze · makes 10 · for your meal-timing goal

Ingredients
· 12 eggs, scrambled
· 1 lb turkey sausage, cooked and crumbled
· 1 can (15 oz) black beans, rinsed
· 1½ cups shredded cheese
· 2 cups spinach, chopped
· 10 large tortillas

Prep day
Cool the fillings, divide among the tortillas, roll tightly, wrap each in parchment, then bag.

Cook night
Microwave from frozen in the parchment, 1½ to 2 minutes, flipping halfway, until hot in the center (165°F).

Serve with
A piece of fruit. Grab one on the way out the door so your first meal happens before your first session.

A prep day plan (about 2 hours for four recipes)

Pick any two to four recipes. Here's an order that keeps the stove, oven, and counter all working at once.

1	Start the chili and the lentil soup simmering.
2	While they cook, mix and roll the meatballs. Bake them.
3	Assemble the dump bags: salsa verde, honey garlic, Greek lemon. Label before you fill them, while the bags are flat and dry.
4	Pull the meatballs, let them cool on the pan. Turn off the soups and let them cool in shallow containers.
5	Portion, label, and freeze everything flat. Write it all on your inventory sheet.

The 10-minute backup dinner

For the night you didn't thaw anything. Keep these on hand and you're always one step from a balanced plate.

Protein	Frozen meatballs (from frozen, microwave), rotisserie chicken, eggs, canned tuna or salmon, frozen cooked shrimp
Fiber	Steam-in-bag vegetables, bagged salad, canned beans
Carb	Microwave rice or quinoa packets, tortillas, frozen potatoes
Fat	Avocado, shredded cheese, olive oil, nuts

Make it stick: strategies from the course

Environmental manipulation	Keep a running inventory sheet on the freezer door so you can see what's there.
Decrease response effort	Freeze in 2-serving portions so you thaw only what you need. Write the cook steps on the bag.
Behavioral momentum	Before bed, move tomorrow's bag from the freezer to the fridge. It's the first link in tomorrow's dinner.
Self-monitoring	Make a tally on the inventory sheet each time you eat a freezer dinner instead of takeout.

Freezer inventory

Tape this to the freezer door.

Meal	Date frozen	Servings	Best by	Eaten (tally)

Bag label

Meal	
Date frozen	
Thaw	
Cook	
Serve with	

Meal	
Date frozen	
Thaw	
Cook	
Serve with	

Adjust any recipe for your allergies, food preferences, and any guidance from your physician or dietitian. This handout is for educational purposes only. It is not medical, psychological, or nutritional diagnosis or treatment. Please talk with your physician or another qualified healthcare provider before changing your diet, exercise routine, or mental health care. Numbers labeled "my coaching guideline" come from Megan's coaching experience, not from a study.