

Be Party-Ready



Football is a great excuse for people to get together, but often that means unexpected guests. Whether it's your kids' soccer team or your husband's bowling buddies, a little preparation can help you be a great hostess on a moment's notice.

Here are a few tips to keep your fridge and pantry stocked, and ways to avoid entertaining emergencies. Best of all, many can be purchased in bulk saving you time and money, too.

For the Freezer

The number of frozen items to keep on hand is limited only by the size of your freezer. If you have a standalone freezer you can store larger items as well as a number of small items. Keep your freezer space in mind when you are shopping for stock-up items to ensure no tasty treat gets left out of the cold.

Appetizers: These days, you can find a huge selection of frozen appetizers to choose from. From jalapeño poppers to potato skins, these appetizers can be grabbed out of the freezer and popped right into the oven, making an easy, stress-free starter for almost any event.

Main Courses: Frozen pizzas don't take up a lot of room in the freezer but will feed several people — especially if you jazz them up with fun toppings. Frozen chicken, hamburger patties and hot dogs are also good to keep on hand, as they taste great when grilled indoors or out. Buy them in bulk and you'll also get a great deal — whether you're feeding football fanatics or just your family.

Desserts: A pie that requires only a half-hour in the oven can be a great treat at the end of a long game. Ice cream half-gallons, ice cream treats that come individually wrapped or sundae cups are also great to have on hand.

For the Fridge

Just as important as appetizers are what to dip the appetizers in! Sour cream makes a good dip on its own for appetizers like jalapeño poppers, but when you add a packet of ranch dressing mix you'll have a great ranch dip you can use on almost anything. You can also get packets of French onion or other dip mixes to keep on hand for chips.

Keep cheese close by to be added to burgers or hot dogs as well as placed on crackers as a snack. You can put cheese on your potato skins for extra-cheesy goodness. Since it's so versatile, consider keeping a couple of kinds in the fridge (cheddar and American are a good start), and then get more adventurous and try other kinds of cheese and see which ones your guests love.

And don't forget the standards for burgers or hot dogs, such as ketchup, mayonnaise, mustard, relish, pickles in a jar and other condiments that you and your guests will enjoy.

For the Kitchen Cabinet or Pantry

An appropriately stocked cabinet or pantry can help you shine when people drop by unexpectedly. Unlike freezer items, cabinet items are ready almost immediately with no thawing or cooking required. From cheese and crackers as an appetizer to cookies as a dessert, you may not even need to turn on an oven to satisfy your guests.

Crackers come in so many styles and varieties that you could easily buy a different box of crackers every week and not have a repeat for months. Try different kinds of crackers with different kinds of cheese to see what your guests like best. And don't forget the chips.

Peanuts, cashews, pistachios and other nuts are probably a standard favorite for your husband's poker buddies. They're easy to eat, not very messy and are great snacks for all ages. As long as you don't have anyone with nut allergies in your home, keep them as a staple in your cabinet for unexpected guests.

Other great ideas include cans of refried beans and salsa and packets of taco seasoning for an easy taco dip. A good budget tip: Stock up on items your family eats regularly. Not only can you save money by buying in bulk, you won't be stuck with a bunch of unused specialty items taking up valuable cabinet space.

For Friends or Family on a Diet

Even if you prefer to drink regular soda, try to keep some diet soda on hand for friends, neighbors or other visitors who might prefer a sugar-free option (the same goes for caffeinated vs. caffeine-free). If you only drink diet, having a two-liter or a six pack of regular soda around is a simple, low-cost way to serve guests that don't care for diet drinks or have trouble with artificial sweeteners.

Rice cakes are a yummy low-calorie snack. Depending on the diet, a cheeseburger with no bun might be an appropriate quick meal for a friend. Low-calorie cookies or snack packs are other simple solutions to keep handy.

Stock Up and Save!

Stocking up now on items you know will be a success will not only make you "hostess with the most-est" for last-minute football parties and your child's after-practice gatherings, but you'll save money on items your family goes through fast. When you compare how much more food you are getting, bulk items are usually priced at a fraction of their smaller-package counterparts. Buying in bulk also cuts down on waste, so you'll be doing your part to reduce the amount of garbage that goes to landfills.

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