

# **COOKING AND EATING ALONE WITH COVID-19**

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Living alone and cooking for one is hard enough, but add the COVID-19 pandemic, and it's even harder. Eating well is very important for everyone, but under the stress of living alone, coupled with the added stress of the pandemic, it's doubly important. Not only do we have to eat enough and not lose weight, but we also need to eat healthy foods.

I strongly avoid eating processed food as much as possible, particularly frozen microwave-ready dinners. Michael Pollan warns us to “not eat anything your great-great-grandmother wouldn't recognize as food. There are a great many food-like items in the supermarket your ancestors wouldn't recognize as food... Stay away from these.” Undereating and poor nutrition can lead to medical problems, which may lead to hospitalization – the last thing I want when living alone. My cat, Igor, doesn't have these problems. He eats the same balanced food every day in measured amounts – Friskies Chicken & Salmon Dinner – and is quite happy with that. That's not very appealing to me, and I would go crazy eating the same dinner every day!

Eating should be pleasurable, and we certainly need more pleasure in these COVID days. The absence of dinnertime conversation leads to eating too fast, which is not good for digestion. Talking to Igor doesn't help much, as he doesn't have much to say. Instead, he just begs for more attention. Sometimes I listen to NPR, but often turn it off as I get tired of hearing the same depressing stories about the pandemic – that is also not good for digestion. I try to sit down at the dining room table – uncluttered, with a nice placemat – as if there were others present. Sometimes it's tempting to eat standing up at the kitchen counter, but I resist that.

When I was younger, I used to do more cooking – as a Sea Scout I always volunteered to cook on the boat, it was better than cleaning up the galley. But later, my wife did most of the cooking. I had to relearn new cooking skills, and ways of doing things, after my wife went into memory care and I began living alone. I actually began cooking more during that previous year. I started buying more cookware to replace our aging collection, and new cooking gadgets. Then, my favorite kitchen store burnt down in the Ballard, Market Street, fire of 2019 – now I have to resort to Amazon, not my favorite way to shop.

For dinner recipes, I perused our old collection of cookbooks – we must have the oldest copy of *Joy of Cooking!* For new recipes, I looked at NY Times Cooking and other online sites. My results didn't look anything like their beautiful pictures, and I often didn't have, or couldn't get, all of the ingredients. I then started to improvise – recipes are just suggestions – and used my skills as a synthetic organic chemist. Precise measuring is not necessary, and cooking times vary. Ingredients are whatever I happen to have in the fridge or my cupboards. My standby is “clean out the fridge vegetable stew or soup.” That's particularly good for vegetables that are at, or just past, their due date.

I am a “sometimes” vegetarian – the only meat I eat is chicken and fish. That is mostly for health reasons – red meat is, in my opinion, not heart-healthy, and I have lost my craving for it. Hamburgers are deadly! That limits what I can cook. One of my favorite dinners is chicken curry – chicken, curry paste, onion, garlic (you can never have too much!), ginger, coconut milk, potatoes, and veggies. No recipe – that’s all you need to know – just throw it together as you go, and make some rice to go with it.

My other standby is pasta. Again, whatever you want to throw into the sauce – tomatoes (I rarely use a prepared pasta sauce), onions, garlic, spices, veggies, and whatever else I fancy or have available. For meat, I sometimes add chicken sausage. Throwing together a pasta dish is quick if you don’t have much time – I don’t like to spend too much time in the kitchen cooking for one.

Cooking for one presents a dilemma – how much to cook at one time. I could cook a full amount and parcel out the rest in one-meal containers to freeze. That seems like too much trouble. Instead, I prepare enough for three or four meals and eat them serially. That can be a little boring, but, at least, I don’t have to worry about what to fix in the meantime. Sometimes at five pm, I panic when I don’t have the slightest idea what my dinner will be, or I forget that I still have a leftover, and start cooking something new. I’m still learning to cook and manage my solo meals.

Grocery shopping presents a problem during the pandemic. At eighty-three, I am very cautious about the virus. Shopping in grocery stores with lots of people is not what I want to do. Most of my shopping is online at PCC via Instacart. That usually works well, although I’d rather pick out my vegetables and fruit, and I like to choose fresh fish myself. My Seattle grandson picks up other things for me. My two vices are chocolate chip cookies – the best are Ballard Market’s in-house-made – and mint chip ice cream. Oh yes, one square of Theo’s chocolate a day is a vitamin for me. Green tea is my usual breakfast drink. No alcohol for me – I don’t want to drink alone.

I think most condo kitchens are made for people who don’t cook. Mine is small, with a refrigerator, oven/stove, microwave, dishwasher (which I never use), and a double sink (garbage disposal on the wrong side!). After cooking with gas for many years, I can’t get used to electricity – it’s either too hot or not hot enough, nothing in between – but that’s what I have.

There is something about eating that is more than just filling our stomach with food. Eating is a spiritual activity, which reminds us to slow down and pay attention to the messages and signs our bodies are giving us. According to Buddha, "To keep the body in good health is a duty, for otherwise, we shall not be able to light the lamp of wisdom, and keep our mind strong and clear." It should also be a communal activity, which is hard to do alone during this pandemic. We can only wait for the new normal, whatever that will be.

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