**Backpacking Meal Planning**

Things to consider:

* Plan to burn 2,500-3,000 calories per day
* Plan for 2 lbs. of food per day
* Lightweight, nutritionally dense food is important
* Plan hot meals for breakfast and dinner only
* Lunch is snacking on the fly
* Easiest to buy prepared meals, but that can be expensive ($6-9 per meal)
* Meals that only require adding hot water are simple, but require preparation
* Dehydrating food at home saves money and weight
* Instant rice, couscous, noodles, pasta, rice mixes and other shelf-stable boxed dinners are easy choices for the meal base
* Proteins such as tuna, salmon, Spam or chicken come in easy vacuum-sealed pouches and are available in most grocery stores
* Make sure you like and will eat the foods you are packing

Before I address breakfast and dinner ideas, I want to discuss lunch and snacking. We will burn a lot of calories while we are moving and likely won’t stop for an extended period of time unless we have to top off our water supply. Trail food should be simple, easy to consume, and compact. Each day before breaking camp, we will want to place our trail food in easy to access locations like pockets and the outer compartments of our packs.

For a regular Friday through Sunday trek, as a minimum you will need to pack one dinner, two breakfasts, and two days of trail food. That assumes your Scout eats dinner before we leave on Friday.

Trail food ideas:

* Energy bars (such as CLIF, KIND, and LUNA)
* [Trail mix](https://www.backpacker.com/skills/how-to-do-trail-mix-your-way)
* Raisins and peanuts
* Jerky
* Dried fruit
* Nuts
* Chocolate

For breakfast and dinner, I want to emphasize simplicity. Boiling water, adding it to a bag, stirring, then letting it steep is a good place to start. It makes clean up easier as well. However, this is just a place to start. There are plenty of other recipes on the internet if you would like to do some research. I encourage you to make notes on the meals you try and modify them to your preference.

**Easiest**

Ready to go freeze dried meals are sold at several stores like Academy, REI, Sportsman’s Warehouse, and Walmart. Brands include Mountain House, Backpackers Pantry, BaseKamp, and Peak Refuel. Benefits include ease of use (just add boiling water and stir), cleanup, weight, and no home preparation time. The biggest negative is the cost. These meals tend to be $6-9 each. Some of them state that they are two servings, but if you have a hungry Scout, they will be able to eat the whole thing by themselves. The single serving portions may not be enough. [Mountain House](https://www.mountainhouse.com/?klaviyosignup=true) offers discounts throughout the year if you sign up for their newsletter. In the past, they offered half price meals with free shipping.

[**Freezer Bag Cooking Recipes**](https://www.greenbelly.co/pages/best-freezer-bag-cooking-recipes)

Freezer bag cooking is similar to the prepared freeze dried meals, but they are assembled at home. Recipes range from the simple to the complex, but the process of cooking is the same. When it is mealtime, you just add hot water to the bag, zip it up, drop it into a bowl to keep it warm and wait a few minutes for everything to heat up. You then can eat directly from the bag and throw it into your trash when you are done. If you are concerned about consuming something that has been cooked in a plastic bag (BPA), you can place the ingredients in a pot or bowl before adding the water or simmer over a stove.

**Breakfast**

**Brown Sugar & Quinoa**

cup instant quinoa flakes

1½ tsp. brown sugar

¼ tsp. ground cinnamon

1 cup water to rehydrate

Add 1 cup near boiling water to rehydrate the freezer bag ingredients. Start stirring and keep stirring for a minute. Let sit in a cozy tightly sealed for 5 minutes. It will thicken up considerably as it cools.

**Breakfast Rice Pudding**

½ cup instant white rice

¼ cup raisins

½ tsp. sugar

¼ tsp. cinnamon

¾ cup water to rehydrate

Add ¾ cup of near boiling water to rehydrate the freezer bag ingredients and stir well. Seal the bag tightly and let sit for 10 minutes or until the rice is softened. Use a cozy to help the rice cook more thoroughly.

**Cheesy Bacon Grits**

2 pkg. instant grits

2 tbsp. powdered milk

2 tbsp. bacon bits or shelf stable bacon

½ tsp. onion powder (not onion salt!)

½ tsp. dried diced garlic (or substitute garlic powder)

2 oz. shelf stable cheddar cheese

1 cup water to rehydrate

Dice the cheese up and add to the freezer bag of ingredients. Add in 1 cup of near boiling water to rehydrate the freezer bag ingredients and stir well. Seal the bag tightly and let sit for 5 minutes or until cool enough to eat.

**Backpacker Oatmeal**

I like this recipe for the variety of ingredients and nutrition. The quantities of each ingredient are only a suggestion. Adjust as you like. Change it up by adding in other flavors such a peanut butter powder, coconut, cocoa powder or instant espresso.

½ cup quick oats

1 tbsp. chopped unsalted walnuts

1 tbsp. roasted pumpkin seeds

1 tbsp. flax seeds

1 tbsp. unsalted sunflower seeds

1 tbsp. freeze dried pineapple

2 tbsp. powdered milk

1-2 tbsp. natural cane or brown sugar or granulated honey

¼ tsp. cinnamon

Dried fruit as desired

1 cup water to rehydrate

Add 1 cup of near boiling water to rehydrate the freezer bag ingredients and stir well. Seal the bag tightly and let sit for 5-8 minutes or until the oats are softened.

**Dinner**

**Alfredo Vegetable Rice**

Substitute couscous or instant brown rice for a subtle change in flavor.

1 cup instant white rice

2 tbsp. Alfredo sauce mix

2 tbsp. parmesan cheese (shelf stable)

2 tbsp. powdered milk

¼ cup freeze dried vegetables

1 cup water to rehydrate

Add 1 cup of near boiling water to rehydrate the freezer bag ingredients and stir well. Seal the bag tightly and let sit for 15-20 minutes. Season with olive oil if desired.

**Moroccan Chicken Couscous**

Apricots and almonds add a twist to this chicken and couscous dish.

1 cup couscous

1 cup dried apricots chopped

¼ cup sliced almonds

1 tsp. salt

½ tsp. cinnamon

½ tsp. cumin

½ tsp. coriander

½ tsp. ground ginger

¼ tsp. ground cloves

1 pack olive oil

7 oz. pack chicken

1 cup Water to rehydrate

Add 1 cup of near boiling water to rehydrate the freezer bag ingredients and stir well. Seal the bag tightly and let sit for 10 minutes. Add an olive oil packet for more fat and calories.

**Cheesy Mashed Potatoes**

½ cup instant mashed potatoes

2 oz. shelf stable cheddar cheese

1 slice summer sausage (or similar shelf stable sausage)

cup water to rehydrate

Add cup of near boiling water to rehydrate the freezer bag ingredients and stir well. Seal the bag tightly and let sit for 5-10 minutes. Add cheese and sausage before eating.

**Mexican Beans and Rice**

The beans are best found online. If the beans are plain, the taco seasoning is critical. Add red pepper flakes to inject some heat.

1 cup instant rice

2 tbsp. instant refried beans

1 tbsp. taco seasoning

1 oz. shelf stable cheddar cheese

1 oz. Fritos

1¼ cup water to rehydrate

Dice the cheese up and add to the freezer bag of ingredients. Add 1¼ cup of near boiling water to rehydrate the freezer bag ingredients and stir well. Seal the bag tightly and let sit for 15 minutes in a cozy if possible. Stir rice to fluff up and fold in both the cheese and Fritos.

**Couscous Primavera**

While the basis of this meal is vegetarian, you can add a protein like chicken or salmon.

1 cup couscous

¼ cup freeze-dried mixed vegetables

½ cube chicken or vegetable bouillon, crumbled

½ tsp. Italian seasoning blend

1 cup water to rehydrate

Add 1 cup of near boiling water to rehydrate the freezer bag ingredients and stir well. Seal the bag tightly and let sit for 10 minutes in a cozy if possible. Add an olive oil packet for more fat and calories.

**Bacon and Cheese Pasta**

3 oz. pack ramen (any flavor)

¼ cup shelf stable bacon

¼ cup shelf stable parmesan cheese

½ tsp. garlic powder

¼ tsp. red pepper flakes

¼ tsp. ground black pepper

1 tsp. olive oil (1 packet)

1½ cups water to rehydrate

Mix seasonings and store separately. Add 1½ cups of near boiling water to rehydrate the ramen noodles and stir well. Seal the bag tightly and let sit for 5-10 minutes. Drain off the water, mix in seasonings and eat.

**Dessert**

**Brownie in a Bag**

1 packet crushed graham crackers

¼ cup chopped walnuts

¾ cup chocolate chips

3 tbsp. powdered milk

2 tbsp. powdered sugar

¼ cup water to rehydrate

Store the powdered milk and chips in one bag, everything else in another. Add ¼ cup of near boiling water to a freezer bag with the dry milk and chocolate chips. Melt the chocolate by dipping the bag in simmering water, then mix in the rest of the ingredients.

**Apple Crisp**

You can substitute other dried fruit such as cranberries or cherries for the apples, but you may want to eliminate the nutmeg and cinnamon.

¼ cup Granola or oats (packaged separately)

¼ lb. dried apples

1 tbsp. brown sugar

⅛ tsp. nutmeg

¼ tsp. cinnamon

1½ cups water to rehydrate

Combine the apples and dry ingredients with 1½ cups of hot water. Let sit for 15-20 minutes, then top with the granola.

The following freezer bag dinner meals require freeze dried ingredients which are lighter and more shelf stable, but can be more difficult to find and expensive. These recipes are from [The Yummy Life](https://www.theyummylife.com/Instant_Meals_On_The_Go). Each meal has the same assembly and cooking instructions.

TO ASSEMBLE: Add all ingredients except the water to a quart freezer Ziploc bag. Seal bag and store until ready to use.

TO COOK IN BAG: Bring water to a boil. With opened bag resting on plate or bowl, pour in boiling water. Seal bag and let soak for 9 minutes, turning bag upside down after 3-4 minutes to redistribute & mix ingredients. Open bag and eat directly from bag, if desired. Or, transfer to a bowl or mug for eating.

**Couscous with Chicken & Vegetables**

cup whole wheat couscous

1 tsp. chia seeds or ground flaxseed (optional)

cup freeze dried chopped chicken

½ cup freeze dried mixed vegetables

1 tbsp. freeze dried onions (or 1 tsp. dried onion flakes)

1½ tsp. powdered chicken flavor base (or bouillon granules)

1½ tsp. freeze dried poultry herb blend (or ¼ tsp. each dried thyme, sage, & parsley)

¼ tsp. garlic powder

⅛ tsp. ground black pepper

¼ tsp. salt (or more to taste)

1½ cups water

**Fiesta Rice with Corn & Chicken**

cup instant brown rice

1 tsp. chia seeds or ground flaxseed (optional)

cup freeze dried chopped chicken

½ cup freeze dried corn

¼ cup freeze dried chopped tomatoes

¼ tsp. dried minced jalapeno

1 tbsp. freeze dried onions (or 1 tsp. dried onion flakes)

1½ tsp. powdered chicken flavor base (or bouillon granules)

1½ tsp. chili powder

¼ tsp. cumin

¼ tsp. dried oregano (Mexican preferred)

½ tsp. freeze dried cilantro (or 1/8 tsp. dried)

¼ tsp. garlic powder

⅛ tsp. ground black pepper

¼ tsp. salt (or more to taste)

1½ cups water

**Creamy Alfredo Noodles with Chicken, Mushrooms, & Pine Nuts**

1 cup pasta broken in 2” pieces (use pasta that normally cooks on stovetop in 4 min. or less but won’t poke a hole in the bag)

1 tsp. chia seeds or ground flaxseed (optional)

¼ cup freeze dried chopped chicken

¼ cup toasted pine nuts

¼ cup freeze dried chopped mushrooms

1½ tsp. powdered chicken flavor base (or bouillon granules)

3 tablespoons grated Parmesan cheese (the dried, unrefrigerated kind in a can)

2 tbsp. instant dried buttermilk powder (or regular powdered milk)

2 tbsp. corn starch

2 tsp. freeze dried Italian herb blend (or ¾ tsp. dried Italian herb blend)

¼ tsp. garlic powder

⅛ tsp. ground black pepper

¼ tsp. salt (to taste)

1¼ cups water

**Couscous with Apricots, Macadamia Nuts, & Chicken**

cup whole wheat couscous

1 tsp. chia seeds or ground flaxseed (optional)

cup freeze dried chopped chicken

cup chopped dried apricots

coarsely chopped macadamia nuts

1 tbsp. freeze dried spring onions (or 1 tsp. dried onion flakes)

1½ tsp. powdered chicken flavor base (or bouillon granules)

¼ tsp. dried thyme

¼ tsp. garlic powder

⅛ tsp. ground black pepper

¼ tsp. salt (or more to taste)

1½ cups water

**Curry Rice with Chicken & Cashews**

cup instant brown rice

1 tsp. chia seeds or ground flaxseed (optional)

¼ cup freeze dried chopped chicken

¼ cup chopped roasted cashews

¼ cup freeze dried mixed vegetables

1 tbsp. freeze dried onions (or 1 tsp. dried onion flakes)

1½ tsp. powdered chicken flavor base (or bouillon granules)

1½ tsp. curry powder

¼ tsp. garlic powder

⅛ tsp. ground black pepper

¼ tsp. salt (or more to taste)

1½ cups water

**Thai Peanut Noodles with Chicken & Vegetables**

1 cup pasta broken in 2” pieces (use pasta that normally cooks on stovetop in 4 min. or less but won’t poke a hole in the bag)

1 tsp. chia seeds or ground flaxseed (optional)

¼ cup freeze dried chopped chicken

¼ cup chopped roasted peanuts

¼ cup freeze dried mixed vegetables

1½ tsp. powdered chicken flavor base (or boullion granules)

2 tbsp. PB2 powdered peanut butter

1½ tsp. freeze dried cilantro (or ½ tsp. dried cilantro)

¼ tsp. garlic powder

¼ tsp. ground ginger

ground cayenne pepper (to taste)

⅛ tsp. ground black pepper

¼ tsp. salt (to taste)

1 cup water

**Additional Thoughts**

The focus of these recipes is simplicity. I am trying to provide a place to start. There are plenty of other ideas on the internet if you would like to do some research. I encourage you to make notes on the meals you try and modify them to your preference.

**References**

[Andrew Skurka](https://andrewskurka.com/tag/backpacking-meal-recipes/)

[Backpacking Food Ideas from the Appalachian Trail](https://www.greenbelly.co/pages/backpacking-food-ideas)

[Backpacking Meal Recipes & Food Dehydration Tips](https://www.cleverhiker.com/blog/13-great-backpacking-meal-recipes-amp-food-dehydration-tips)

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[Easy Meals For The Lightweight Backpacker](http://backpackingmastery.com/food/freezer-bag-cooking.html)

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[Instant Meals on the Go](https://www.theyummylife.com/Instant_Meals_On_The_Go)

REI Expert Advice

[Meal Planning for Backpacking](https://www.rei.com/learn/expert-advice/planning-menu.html)

How To Dehydrate Food

[Meal Planning for Ultralight Backpacking](https://www.rei.com/learn/expert-advice/meal-planning-for-ultralight-backpacking.html)