



Food as Health on a Budget

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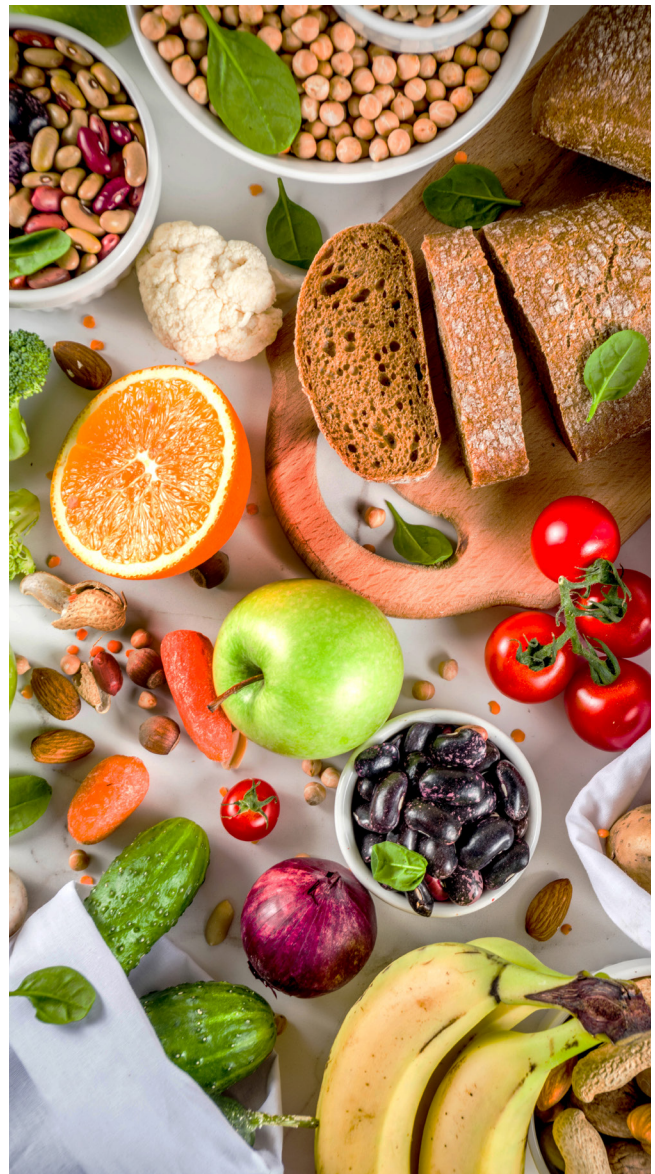
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We make several choices about the foods we eat each day. This starts at planning meals, ends with storing leftovers, and includes everything in between. There are ways we can save money and stretch our food dollars at each step of the process, while also making nutritious choices that support overall health and well-being.

Meal planning

A great way to get the most out of your food budget and prevent food waste is to plan weekly meals and snacks before you go to the store. A list will help you stay on track and make only the purchases you need. Check your fridge, freezer, pantry, or cupboard to see what ingredients you already have before you begin planning meals. Keep your pantry stocked with herbs, spices, and nonperishable foods like whole-wheat pasta, brown rice, and beans to make it easier to plan a variety of meals. When sticking to a budget, avoid recipes that call for special ingredients that you likely won't use again. You can also try swapping unique ingredients in recipes for something you will use or may already have.



Another trick is to look for weekly coupons and sales and build your menu around those lower cost items. Many stores now have websites and apps that offer exclusive coupons. This is helpful when looking for items that tend to be more expensive on the grocery list like meat, fish, and poultry. Another money-saving tip is to plan a few meals each week where all foods on the plate come from plants using beans as a source of protein which are often more affordable.

You can also plan meals in ways that use up all your fresh ingredients each week. For example, if you use half of an onion in one recipe, try to add the other half of the onion to a meal later in the week. Some ideas are soups, tacos, pizzas, or bowls that use up similar ingredients in different forms. Try to choose fresh produce for recipes that can double as a snack like baby carrots, bell peppers, and cucumbers so there's no wasted food.

Shopping

At the store, bring your list and check clearance areas. Meats at or near their expiration date are usually marked down to a lower price. You can eat them as long as you plan to use them by the expiration date or freeze them when you get home for later use. Produce sections often have clearance areas as well, and you may be able to find some of the fruits and vegetables on your list. It's a good idea to shop seasonally, when possible. Fruits and vegetables are often more affordable when they are in season. For example, fresh berries are more likely to go on sale in the summer months and are more expensive in the colder months.

If you are looking for something that's not currently in season, it's a great idea to check the frozen section. Frozen fruits and vegetables are often more affordable than fresh, and they are just as nutritious. You can also use part of the package and put the rest back in the freezer to use at a later date. See the box for a few tips when using frozen vegetables.

Tips for cooking with frozen vegetables

- Cook most frozen vegetables straight from the freezer using a high heat to prevent sogginess.
- Avoid adding salt at the beginning of the cooking process. Salt can draw out moisture which can lead to a mushier texture.
- Frozen vegetables usually cook faster than fresh, so be sure to adjust your cooking time if your recipe calls for fresh.
- Roast at 400 degrees Fahrenheit or sauté in a pan over medium-high heat. Stir them often to prevent sticking.
- If using a slow cooker, add frozen vegetables during the last hour or two of cook time.
- If you are serving your dish chilled or at room temperature, you might not need to fully cook the frozen veggie before adding. For example, warm frozen peas in the microwave for just 1-2 minutes before adding to potato or egg salad. Just be sure to drain out any water from the bag before mixing them in.

Canned vegetables are a good option as well. Be sure to rinse them before use and look for no- or low-sodium options when possible. Canned vegetables tend to go on sale around the winter holidays and may be a worthwhile investment if you like to buy items in bulk.

Consider whether items with large amounts of packaging or that are already prepped for you are worth the higher cost. Think of the extra cost of the packaging material or the time someone



else put into prepping the food item. Examples include prechopped produce, seasoned meats, or prepackaged snacks. Despite the higher cost, these items may be a good fit for someone who needs convenience. For example, prechopped produce may make it easier for people to prepare recipes with fresh ingredients if they experience poor mobility or a disability.

Ask your local grocery store when they usually restock each week. The store might put some items on sale to make room for new items on the shelves. Finally, try not to shop when you are hungry. This can lead to impulse purchases which can throw off your weekly budget. Try to have a meal or snack before heading to the store so you won't be as tempted to stray from your list.

Storing

When you get home from the store, properly store fruits, vegetables, and other perishable foods right away to keep them fresh for as long as possible. Storing food in the right place will help them last longer. Use the "first in, first out" method. This means you should store the freshest produce in the back of the fridge and the oldest in the front so you can use it first. Some fruits can cause other produce

Storing fruits and vegetables

Refrigerator

- Store berries, greens, mushrooms, melons, green beans, grapes, lettuce, broccoli, sprouts, and carrots in a lower drawer in the refrigerator.
- If your refrigerator has a crisper drawer, this is the best place for produce as it maintains a higher humidity level.
- Leafy greens will do best in an airtight container.
- While it's traditional to store apples in a bowl on the countertop, they will actually stay fresh longer in the refrigerator.

Pantry or cupboard

- Store potatoes, garlic, and onions in a cool dark place like a pantry or cabinet. This prevents greening which can happen when these vegetables are exposed to light.
- Try to keep the potatoes and onions separated as they may cause one another to go bad faster.

Countertop

- Keep some fruits, including tomatoes, bananas, oranges, and avocados, at room temperature until they are ripe then move them to the refrigerator. Store tomatoes away from direct sunlight.

to go bad faster. For example, you should store apples, bananas, peaches, and pears away from other produce.

For convenience, wash many fruits and vegetables before storing. Do not wash mushrooms and berries, however, until right before you are ready to use them.



To wash fruits and vegetables, simply rinse them under cool water. Hot water may allow the bacteria we are trying to wash away to enter the pores of the fruits and vegetables. There is no need for any of the “washes” you may see on store shelves.

In the freezer, uncooked meats, vegetables, and fully cooked meals will last 6 months in an airtight container. If you don't have enough airtight containers, try wrapping foods in aluminum foil before freezing to prevent freezer burn. Just remember to always thaw frozen food in the refrigerator overnight, in the microwave, or under cold running water to protect from harmful bacteria. For food safety, you should never thaw on the countertop.

Preparing meals and snacks

There are several tips and tricks you can use to make the most of your food budget when making meals and snacks at home. These tips save you time, prevent food waste, and add nutritious foods to your diet.

- Make double batches of soups and stews. Use one for a meal and store the other in the freezer to have it on hand for an easy dinner another night.
- Look for ways to cook once but eat twice. For example, cook and shred several chicken breasts at one time to use in meals throughout the week. Use shredded chicken for chicken wraps, salads, or soups.
- Consider chopping or prepping vegetables as soon as you get home from the store so you can conveniently add them to meals throughout the week. Once chopped, store all vegetables in the refrigerator.
- Try dedicating one afternoon to preparing a few snacks and meals to have during the week. This can include breakfast and lunch options.
- Make lunch easy with grab-and-go boxes using deli meat, whole-wheat crackers, cheese, and sliced fruits and vegetables.
- Buy oats in bulk and try making overnight oats. Just soak your oats overnight in milk along with any fruits or other mix-ins you enjoy. In the morning, they will have a soft, pudding-like texture and you can eat them cold or reheat them in the microwave for a simple, affordable breakfast.

Using leftovers

Using leftovers is one of the best ways to stretch food dollars. Not only does it prevent wasted food, but also reduces the number of times you cook each week. Cooked foods will last three to four days in a sealed container in the refrigerator. Label leftovers with the date you made the food to make sure you eat it within the recommended window of time.

When reheating, be sure to heat the food to an internal temperature of 165 degrees F. When you are finished eating, return the unused leftovers to the fridge within two hours. Since the quality may decrease with reheating, try to only heat the amount you need each time.

There are a few tricks for ensuring leftovers taste just as good the next day. Pasta with meat sauce is a common meal but store leftover pasta and sauces separately. When it's time to reheat, drop the pasta in boiling water for 60 seconds instead of reheating in the microwave.

When reheating frozen soups and stews, add a half cup of broth or water as they can thicken in the

freezer. If you have the time, leftovers often taste much better if you reheat them on the stovetop, in the oven, or in a toaster oven instead of the microwave. Leftovers will reheat more evenly, and it is more likely they will maintain their original texture. Lastly, there are no rules for mixing and matching leftovers. At the end of the week, prepare a “hodge podge” dinner to use up any remaining leftovers.

Bringing it all together

Finding the best ways to stretch your food dollars can be challenging. However, it is easier to identify small ways to save money and prevent food waste if we break down the process step by step. With a little effort, a plan, and a few tips and tricks, you can make the most of your food budget.

Eating leftover rice

You can store and reheat safely, but it may need a little more care than other foods. This is because uncooked rice contains spores of the bacteria *Bacillus cereus* which can survive the cooking process and cause food poisoning. Following these tips means you can safely enjoy your leftover rice.

- Cool and store cooked rice quickly instead of leaving it on the countertop where spores can develop and cause illness.
- To cool, place the rice in shallow containers without lids in the fridge.
- Once cool, cover the containers then reheat and eat within 5 days.
- Add a tablespoon of water before heating in the microwave and cover with a lid so it can steam.

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