

Dinner on a dollar

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You can prepare appealing and nutritious meals while staying on budget. Proper planning, careful shopping, and basic food-preparation knowledge are key tips to make dinner on a dollar. You can save money while preparing healthy meals and pleasing your family.

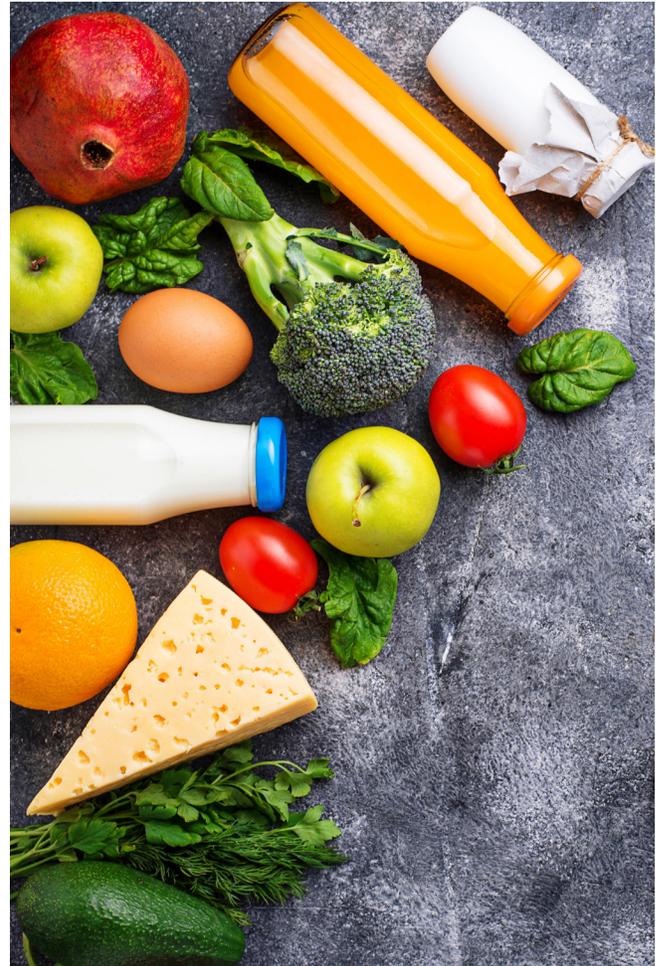
Questions to ask yourself

First, look at your food habits. Do you eat on the run, stopping at fast food restaurants or convenience stores? Do you purchase convenience foods regularly, such as frozen main meal dinners, single-serving products, prepared cakes or pastries, or deli foods? Do you eat out or order in often? Total your monthly spending on these items, and you'll be surprised how much money you're spending on food.

Even though convenience foods can make life a little easier by saving time, a dollar here and a dollar there adds up quickly. To truly have dinner on a dollar, you will have to prepare most of your meals at home using few convenience items. Just because you are saving money doesn't mean it has to take a lot of time either.

Tips for planning meals

The key to dinner on a dollar is to spend a little time up front planning your meals for the week. You should consider a variety of cooking methods, colors, textures, and temperatures while incorporating family preferences. Select recipes with short preparation and cooking times — such as stir-fry dishes, fish, salads, and stews. Be creative by trying new recipes. You can serve traditional breakfast foods, vegetarian meals, or hearty soups



and salads for dinner, too. Use leftovers to create new meals, casseroles, and sandwiches. If you find good food sales while shopping, either substitute for a planned meal or include in your next week's planning. Always follow food safety guidelines; cool cooked foods quickly to 41 degrees F or below and reheat cooked foods to 165 degrees F.

- **See what you already have.** Look in the freezer, refrigerator, pantry, and cabinets. Keep your pantry organized to make it easier to take a quick look before going shopping. Or keep a list of what is in the refrigerator or freezer. If you don't usually do this and would like to

start, don't despair. Practicing will allow this to become a habit.

- **Think about your schedule.** See what day you can make a grocery list, grocery shop, and/or prepare meals. Making a list on your mobile phone can be easy to add to when food items run out. Check out apps that may have healthy recipes and make the shopping list for you.
- **Use a weekly calendar to plan meals.** Weekly calendars can help plan out your meals for the week. Weekly calendars also make it easier to see what you need to buy at the grocery store and help you build your grocery list.
- **Use online resources to get healthy recipe ideas.** Online resources have great recipe examples and ideas. USDA MyPlate has a variety of resources for planning weekly meals and is a good place to start.
- **Plan to use leftovers.** Cooking larger recipes can give you the opportunity for make-ahead meals or leftovers. Leftovers can help reduce costs and time when preparing meals or lunches during the week. Try using the leftover roasted chicken in enchiladas or pot pie. Small appliances such as a pressure cooker, slow cooker, or bread machine may assist you in speedier, less-mess meals.

Tips for shopping

Once meals are planned and shopping lists are made, it is time to purchase food items. At the store, it is important to find foods that meet your nutritional needs and are a good price. Generally, store brands are less expensive than national brands with little to no difference in taste. Learn to read labels if you are concerned about calories, sodium, food allergens, or additives.

Grocery stores look different depending on where you live; there are many different types of stores where you can purchase food.

- **Conventional supermarkets:** community grocery stores or super-markets offering a wide variety of food items
- **Supercenters:** one-stop shopping that includes food items and other merchandise items such

as clothing, toys, and houseware items

- **Warehouse clubs:** offers bulk shopping at reduced prices, some warehouse clubs require a membership fee
- **Convenience stores:** grab-and-go type stores, typically attached to or a part of gas stations
- **Limited assortment supermarkets:** very similar to conventional supermarkets but offer reduced volumes and typically lower prices

Tips for every aisle

Fruits and vegetables

- **Fresh produce.** Buy in-season produce. In-season items are usually cheaper. Prepackaged items may be more expensive. Fresh fruits and vegetables begin to lose their nutritional value as soon as they are picked — so buy only what you will eat within a few days. If you have a local farmers market or community-assisted agriculture farm, check to see if this is in your budget.
- **Canned or frozen.** Canned or frozen fruits and vegetables are a great alternative to fresh produce. They can last much longer and are sometimes cheaper. Buy canned items with “low sodium” or “no added salt.” The nutritional value of canned, frozen, and fresh are considered equal for most nutrients.

Grains

The grain aisles include breads, cereals, pastas, and rice. Try to buy whole-grain products. Rice and pasta are typically inexpensive food options.

Protein

- **Animal protein.** Meat is probably the most expensive food purchase you will make. Purchase larger cuts of beef (family-sized or value pack) that can be cut into smaller portions and used for several meals. For example, a whole chicken is a good buy if you intend to use all of the parts. The meat on the chicken can be deboned and used for multiple meals.

- **Plant protein.** Dry beans, peas, and peanut butter are good low-cost substitutes for meat that are packed with protein.
- **Canned and fresh fish.** Canned tuna and pink salmon, as well as fresh whiting and ocean perch, are inexpensive protein sources.

Dairy

To get the most for your dollar, buy larger sized dairy products instead of smaller or individual packages. Make sure to use the products before the expiration date. Use your own fruit to flavor yogurt instead of buying flavored yogurt. Purchase blocks and wedges of cheese to grate and cube yourself. Choose lower fat options, if that is a concern. Purchase nonfat dry milk solids and reconstitute for cooking only. (Nonfat dry milk will keep for up to six months on the shelf.) Make sure to check the sell by date to see that you are buying the freshest product.

Bakery

Bakery outlets are a source of day-old bread products which can cost less than fresh items. Consider baking your own breads. Bulk packaging of cereals and pastas may be the answer if you consume a lot of these foods.

Remember that instant and ready-to-eat cereals are more expensive than they are in their natural form. Compare the cost of presweetened with unsweetened cereals.

Other

Choose a checkout lane without candy and other snacks. This will prevent any unintentional purchases during checkout.

Kitchen timesavers

- Place equipment close to where you'll actually use it.
- Use time-saving appliances, such as a microwave, blender, or food processor.
- Cook more than one food item at a time.
- Serve one-dish meals, such as a casserole, several times a week. Most covered casseroles can be refrigerated up to 1 to 2 days or frozen for up to 2 months after being cooked.
- Serve simple, yet hearty, meals such as a meat and vegetable main dish with a salad or a hearty stew with bread and a salad.
- Stretch a meal by adding vegetables, pasta, or rice to ground beef, chopped meat, fish, or hard-cooked eggs.
- Substitute canned tuna for crab, shrimp, or lobster in mixed dishes.
- Reuse leftover vegetables, pasta, rice, and meat for casseroles and soups but follow food safety guidelines when reheating or storing.
- Get the family involved with preparing and serving the meals by sharing the responsibilities.

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