

STRETCH YOUR FOOD BUDGET

It is easy to underestimate the amount you spend on food and other household items. Your food costs may vary depending on the number of people in your household, your lifestyle choices and the number of times a week you eat out. Many Americans find that their grocery bill is just slightly below their housing costs. USDA research lists a moderate monthly food cost plan for a family of 4 is estimated to be approximately \$1,050*. How does your family compare?

Follow the tips below to reduce your food costs, shop smarter and put a meal plan in place. These efforts will not only save you money, but also reduce the stress mealtimes can often bring to families.

Take Inventory

Go through your cupboards, refrigerator and freezer and make a list of foods that need to be used during the week. Pay close attention to expiration dates and put those items in the front of your shelves to use them first. Develop a meal plan using these foods, buying only the items needed to complement what you already have. Determine how often you will eat out and consider any extra needs for the week. Don't forget about breakfast, lunch and, of course, snacks. If you plan for all of these things, you will be less likely to impulse buy when you get to the store. Also make sure to allow for some flexibility for mood and schedule changes. Post your list so that everyone in the family knows where it is.

Make a List

After you have settled on a meal plan for the week, make a list of all the items you will need to buy at the grocery store. Keep that list posted in a visible place so that you can add staples as you run out. Making your list according to the layout of the store will save you time and keep you from roaming the aisles. You can also search for online shopping apps to help you make your list or find coupons.

Shop Strategically

If you plan accordingly, your shopping experience can be painless and quick. Never, never shop when you are hungry. The temptation to pick up additional items not on your list increases dramatically when you are fighting hunger pangs. Shop without children if at all possible. Shop with your list and stick to it. Be wary of impulse items located on the ends of the grocery store aisles which can quickly bust your budget. Did you know that merchants place the highest price items in the middle shelves at eye level and the less expensive items are positioned above and below? Comparison shop and check labels. Many generic items are of good quality. When it comes to produce and deli items, buy only what you need for a few days. Be flexible and keep possible substitutions in mind for those items you find out of stock.

Be Creative

Be willing to experiment a bit. Try something new to stretch your budget. It may be a twist on what you already enjoy: substituting vegetables that are in season and less costly versus a more expensive option that the recipe calls for. Make the most of leftovers by using them in other meals and snacks throughout the week. Package up leftovers in individual serving portions and freeze for future meals (don't forget to date them). Eat meatless once a week. Meals can be just as healthy and cost less without meat. Try serving dried beans, eggs, peanut butter, nuts, tofu and cottage cheese in place of meat. These items make great salads and soups or can be the main ingredient in stir fry dishes. The sky is the limit!



Weekly Meal Planner

	Breakfast	Lunch	Dinner	Snacks	Grocery List
Day 1					<u>0</u> _____
Day 2					<u>0</u> _____
Day 3					<u>0</u> _____ <u>0</u> _____
Day 4					<u>0</u> _____
Day 5					<u>0</u> _____ <u>0</u> _____
Day 6					<u>0</u> _____ <u>0</u> _____
Day 7					<u>0</u> _____