

12 TIPS FOR STRETCHING YOUR GROCERY BUDGET



Living on the dollar menu isn't for the faint of heart. No one likes financial anxiety, especially when it comes to bringing food to the table. But with a little knowledge and resourcefulness, you can eat well on any budget.

Make Every Dollar Count

These tips will keep your refrigerator full without emptying your checking account.

- Before brainstorming meals, look for sales and know what's in season; out-of-season items are usually more expensive.
- Planning weekly meals keeps costs low by using the same base ingredients in creative ways. Menus also help prepare a smart shopping list.
- Make a shopping list and stick to it. By forming and adhering to a plan, you'll avoid impulse purchases not included in your weekly menus. List making helps you think long term and make the most of ingredients. Make sure your list includes multi-use ingredients based on your weekly meal plans so you can stretch that grocery trip as long as possible between paychecks.
- Use coupons, but only on items you'll need for your menus. Don't buy something just because it's on sale.
- Use resources like cookbooks or online budget-cooking blogs for creative ideas.
- Meat is the most expensive food item, and eating vegetarian even once a week will save you cash. When you do spring for meat, uncut is less expensive pound for pound.
- Shop in bulk when it pays off. If you use lots of boxed broth or olive oil, for example, head to a club store for a case and stock up. Although buying in bulk can sometimes be cheaper in the long run, shopping in small quantities is the best choice for ingredients you only need in specific recipes. Shopping small allows you to buy what you need and waste less food and money.
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- Skip the junk food and focus on staples that can provide several nutrient-dense meals.
- Pick the right time to shop. To avoid impulse purchases, shop after you've eaten, and hit the stores when there are fewer shoppers (late at night or early in the morning) so you aren't rushed. Sunday mornings are prime shopping periods, and you can take advantage of Sunday paper coupons.
- Minimizing waste is key to saving food money. Be realistic about how many fruits and vegetables you'll eat. Freeze meats, sauces and leftovers into serving sizes to eliminate how much food you toss, and stretch your groceries into several meals.
- Keep your pantry stocked. Believe it or not, a kitchen equipped with food staples helps save money by preventing you from splurging on expensive, prepared food when you're hungry.

A Recipe in Action

The Three-in-One Mexican Meal is a great example of a recipe that keeps on giving; it can be adapted for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Start by making broth with beef shanks, an inexpensive cut, seasoned with onion, garlic and salt. Once the meat is tender, remove the bones and divide into two equal portions. This is your base for the three meals.

For lunch, toss vegetables and pasta into the broth and make beef soup; add a little shredded meat for a richer consistency. Sauté one portion of the shredded beef in a little oil to make tacos for dinner; top with cilantro, onion, and Pico de Gallo (made with diced tomato, onion and cilantro seasoned with salt and fresh lime juice).

Finally, use the other portion of the meat and mix with eggs and salsa to make a breakfast burrito the next day. You can do the same recipe with rotisserie chicken. The idea is to make the most of your ingredients.

Eating healthy on a small budget isn't a cakewalk, but it's doable -- and you don't have to eat ramen. With a little planning and smart shopping, you can keep both your stomach and wallet full.