

# CUTTING FOOD COSTS

Keeping Your Food Budget from Eating Up  
Your Income



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## Keeping Your Food Budget from Eating Up Your Income

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the average consumer spends between 12% and 13% of their budget on food. While that may seem small compared to other expenses, like housing (33%), it can still have a significant impact on your ability to maintain a balanced budget.

Practices like frequently buying specialty items, shopping at high-end grocery stores, and dining out at expensive restaurants can easily lead to credit card debt.

Conversely, taking steps to keep food costs minimized can free up money in your budget for saving, paying off debt, and achieving other financial goals.

This guide offers tips on how to keep food costs low. You'll learn:

- Easy ways to save on items you love
- How to minimize expenses without sacrificing nutrition
- How to use today's technology to help you save

## Minimizing Food Expenses Step-by-Step

### Step 1: Plan your meals

A little planning can go a long way in keeping food costs low. If you can plan your meals for the week and shop for everything at once, you can coordinate to fully use ingredients. This will help reduce food waste and stretch your food budget further.

#### *Tips for smart meal-planning:*

- **Plan meals so you can use all of what you buy.** When it comes to items like produce, you may not use all of what

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you buy on one meal, particularly in a smaller household. So, plan meals for the week so you can use each item fully.

- **Don't try new recipes on days where you're short on time.** Always try out new recipes on a weekend or a day off, so cooking doesn't stress you out and send you to the drive-thru.
- **Easy recipes are best for the middle and end of the week.** Use recipes that you're familiar with or look up 30-minute meals for days when you're going to be tired from your hectic schedule.
- **Do as much prep as possible on weekends or your days off.** Components of dishes and even whole meals (soups and casseroles) can be made in advance and refrigerated or frozen. Then on busy days, all you need to do is heat things up.
- **Cook enough each day to use leftovers for lunches.** Make more than what you need for a single meal, then pack up the rest for lunches the next day to avoiding eating out every day at work.

## Step 2: Double up on coupons

Many shoppers aren't aware that they can use coupons from a manufacturer as well as store coupons and deals from their grocer on the same item.

For example, if a manufacturer has a coupon for \$2 off an item, and your grocer is offering a BOGO (buy one, get one free) on the same item, you can pair those offers together. You'd get two of the item – one for free and one with the \$2 discount.

This works on any in-store offer and coupon pairing. Doubling up on deals can provide even more savings.



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### *Tips for couponing like an expert:*

- **Sign up for a coupon app or coupon website.** You can either save coupons on your smartphone that can be scanned, or you can print them and take them to the store.
- **Download your grocer's app or check weekly circulars.** Many grocers have apps that you can use to find in-store deals and offers. If not, check the store's printed circulars in your mail.
- **Consider coupons and in-store offers as you set your meal plan.** Coordinate meal plans around what's on sale each week.
- **If a store offers batches of an item for a discounted price, then each individual item would be discounted as well.** If you see a "5 for \$10 offer" but you don't need five, you can just get one and the price would be \$2.
- **If your grocer offers a price match, take advantage of it.** If you like a particular store but find a better price offer somewhere else, take the offer into the store to get the same discount where you shop.

### **Step 3: Make a list and never shop without it**

Lists help ensure you get everything you need so you don't have to head back to the store mid-week. They also help you avoid impulse shopping – choosing items that you don't need or getting more stuff than you and your family can eat in a week.

Your list can be as high-tech or low-tech as you want. You can write your list out on paper and cross items off as you shop, use a note on your smartphone, or find an app that makes grocery lists and lets you check items.

### *Tips for becoming a master list-maker:*

- **If your list is on paper, take it with you everywhere.** Keep your list

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in your purse, wallet or car, so you never end up shopping without it. Keeping your list on your smartphone can make this easier.

- **Write items down during the week as they run out.** Trying to remember everything you ran out of before your big weekly shopping trip isn't easy, so make sure to jot things down as you toss the empty bottle or package.
- **If an item isn't on your list, make sure you really need it.** If you simply forgot something you need for the week and see it in the store, it's fine to pick it up. What you want to avoid is getting pulled in by store displays that drive you to impulse shop.

## Step 4: Log receipts for rebates

Once you finish shopping, you can still save money by using rebate apps. Rebate apps work similarly to coupon apps (and some coupon apps do both). Rebates mean you get money back by showing proof of purchase.

This used to involve mailing physical proof in, but apps make redeeming rebates simple:

1. Choose the store where you plan to shop.
2. Find rebate offers on products that you plan to buy.
3. Take a picture of your receipt when you get home.
4. Build up earnings with each rebate you redeem.

Some apps only give you points or coupons back, while some offer gift cards or allow you to withdraw actual cash. Cash or gift cards are typically the most convenient.

You may also be able to link your rebate app to your grocery store app. If you pay with your phone using the store app, the rebate app will process your purchases and apply rebates automatically. This saves you the trouble of photographing receipts.

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## The Dilemma of Dining Out

According to BLS, the average consumer spends 43% of their food budget dining out. Going out to eat is expensive, especially when you add on appropriate tips. If you're eating out for most of your meals, you're wasting money.



Cooking more meals at home and taking lunch to work and school can help you save money. That's not to say you need to cut dining out completely. Going out to eat occasionally and being strategic about how you do it will help you keep costs low.

### ***Tip 1: Set a separate budget for dining out***

It can be helpful to divide your food budget into two categories – groceries and dining out. Groceries are a necessity but dining out is a luxury. Set a reasonable budget for dining out that you can cut if money is tight for one month. This way, you still eat; you just don't eat out.

This will also help you limit the number of meals that you eat out. You'll be able to see if you have the budget for it before you make plans.

### ***Tip 2: Check prices before you decide on a restaurant***

You can check a restaurant's website to see how much they charge. There are also apps like Yelp and Open Table that rate and allow you to filter restaurants by price.

Reservation apps like Open Table also give you points for making reservations through the app. You can redeem the points for discounts at restaurants or gift cards.

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### ***Tip 3: When you want to dine out, look for discounts***

There are plenty of ways to find discounts on restaurants and fast food:

- Use apps like Groupon and Living Social to find restaurants with deals near you.
- Check cash-back offers on your debit or credit cards (debit is preferable).
- Go online and search for printable restaurant coupons.
- Purchase an entertainment coupon book – this costs money, but can be great when you're traveling and will eat most of your meals out.

### ***Tip 4: Only dine out when you have the cash to cover the bill***

If you have cash on hand, then it's fine to treat yourself to a meal out.

Even if you plan to use a credit card to use a cash-back offer, you should have cash available to pay off the charges that month. This will ensure interest charges don't quickly offset the cashback that you earn on the transaction.

If you have a major event like a birthday or something else that you want to celebrate coming up, make sure to have some money allocated in your budget to cover the meal. There's nothing wrong with saving up one paycheck so you can treat yourself or your family!

## **More Tips for Cutting Food Costs**

### **Cook with raw ingredients instead of buying pre-packaged products**

It is generally more cost-effective to buy raw ingredients and make items yourself than to buy pre-packaged products. For example, buying the ingredients to make cookies will yield

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more batches of cookies than if you simply buy pre-packaged cookies or cut-and-bake cookie dough.

Cooking from scratch takes longer, so remember to make as much as you can on your

days off to reduce the time spent cooking on busy workdays.



### **Only buy in bulk if it makes sense for your family size**

People often assume that buying in bulk is cheaper, but for smaller households, it doesn't always make sense. This is especially true for perishable items that have shorter expiration dates.

Purchasing things like perishables (meats, cheeses and other dairy products, baked goods) in bulk only makes sense if you have a family size that justifies it. If you consistently throw out part of the food you're buying in bulk, it might be time to go back to buying in smaller quantities.

### **Freeze meats to avoid food waste**

Whether you're buying in bulk or just buying regular servings for a smaller household, make sure to freeze meat that you won't use before it has the opportunity to spoil. Most meats will start to go bad within a few days of purchase.

If four chicken cutlets come in a package, but you're only cooking for two, then freeze the other two cutlets immediately when you get home from the grocery store. Make sure to wrap meat that you freeze in tinfoil to prevent freezer burn and label it with the type of meat, servings, and date.

Then, before you set your meal plan for the next week, always check what you have frozen first.



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## Consider farmer's markets and CSAs

Another good way to reduce the cost of buying fresh ingredients is to find a local farmer's market or a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture).

- **Farmer's markets allow you to buy food from local vendors.** Since you buy direct from the farmer, it can reduce the cost of similar items that you'd buy in a grocery store. Local vendors set up booths, so you can buy a variety of ingredients.
- **Community Supported Agriculture allows you to purchase a share of a farm's products by becoming a member or subscriber of the establishment.** You receive a box of produce each week throughout the farming season.

You can look find local farmer's markets and CSAs in your area through sites like [www.localharvest.org](http://www.localharvest.org).

## Organic is often more expensive

Organic foods must follow a strict set of guidelines as they are produced. It costs more for farmers and ranchers to produce organic food, so it will typically cost more to buy them. Buying only organic products can significantly increase your monthly food costs.

## Get growing yourself!

Even if you live an apartment or condo, it is still possible to grow at least some products yourself. You can have a small patio garden or an indoor herb garden. If you have a yard, you can use some of your added space to grow your own produce. This is especially



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useful if you want to control what pesticides and fertilizers get used on your food without paying the increased prices that typically come with organic.

Make sure to check with a local gardening store to learn what fruits, vegetables, and herbs grow best where you live and with the space that you have.

### **Don't be afraid to try a different grocery store**

The best-known grocery stores aren't always the most cost-effective. Try looking for other grocery stores in your area, going in and seeing what they have. You may find a smaller regional grocery chain or even a local grocer that offers better pricing than the big national chains.

### **Portion food correctly**

Leftovers are great for lunches, but make sure you're portioning food correctly for each person and the number of servings that you need. Consider how many dishes you're cooking for each meal and how much each member of your household will really eat.

If you're building leftovers into your meal plan, keep in mind that lunch portions tend to be smaller than dinner portions. Check with other family members to make sure they're eating everything you send with them for lunch, then adjust your portions accordingly.

Portion control is also particularly important for holidays and big family meals. It's fairly common to have more leftovers than your family will be able to eat before they spoil. Make sure that these meals – even Thanksgiving – don't go overboard just for the sake of having everything included in a traditional holiday spread.

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## Make big family meals and gatherings potluck

Besides controlling portions, another way to reduce the cost burden of big family meals and gatherings is to make these events potluck. Guests can bring dishes, such as side items or alternative main dishes if not everyone will eat the same main dish.

You can also make parties BYOB. If you don't want to have your guests bring everything, you can supply mixers and then ask party attendees to bring the alcohol. This will significantly reduce the cost of hosting events at your home.

## Get the whole family involved in prep and cooking

Having one member of the household be responsible for all the cooking can be a burden. Getting the whole family involved will speed up prep work, so you're not spending your whole weekend in the kitchen to get meals ready for the next week.

Even kids can get involved in simple prep tasks that you feel comfortable letting them take on. Getting them involved in meal planning and prep work can help impart good nutrition and budgeting habits.

## How Long Will Your Food Keep?

Whether you're making food ahead for weekday meals or simply want to know how long you have before raw ingredients go bad, this table can help:

PRODUCT	FRIDGE	FREEZER
Casseroles	3-4 days	3-4 months
Beans	1 week	8 months
Soups / stews / chili	3-4 days	2-3 months
Cookies / cookie dough	2-3 weeks	3 months
Muffins	4 days	3 months

PRODUCT	FRIDGE	FREEZER
Ground meat	1-2 days	3-4 months
Cuts of meat (beef, lamb, pork)	3-5 days	Steaks: 6-12 months Chops: 4-6 months Roasts: 4-12 months
Poultry	1-2 days	Whole: 1 year Parts: 9 months
Bacon	7 days	1 month
Sausage	1-2 days	1-2 months
Fish	1-2 days	Lean fish: 6-8 months Fatty fish: 2-3 months
Cut vegetables (for meal prep)	2-3 days; check online for the best way to store each type of produce	See fruit and vegetable notations below
Fruits*	Varies based on item	1 year
Vegetables*	Varies based on item	18 months

\* Note: If you buy produce in bulk, most fruits and vegetables can be frozen to maintain the freshness. Check online for the best way to freeze each item.

The FDA provides more safe food guidelines at

<https://www.fda.gov/media/74435/download>