

## Saving Time and Money at the Grocery Store

These days, it's more important than ever to keep a close eye on your weekly food budget. Take a few minutes at the beginning of the week to plan out your family's meals and what you will need from the grocery store. With a solid weekly meal plan, you will save yourself time, frustration-and most importantly-money. Read on for five of our top meal-planning tips to save money and stretch your food budget.

1. Organize your recipes. Keep an organized catalog of your go-to recipes. There are dozens of online meal-planning tools you can use, or go old-fashioned and use a recipe box and index card system. However you organize, choose the recipes you're going to make for a given week, and plan your grocery-shopping trip around them.
2. Know what's in your kitchen. Before you make a shopping list, go through your cabinets, freezer and refrigerator, and list what you have. Knowing what you *don't* need to buy at the store will help you budget for the week and will give you a head start on planning your meals. Staple items like pasta, cereals and grains can be stored for a long time, don't need to be purchased on every shopping trip and can be the foundation of your weekly meal plan.
3. Make a plan and stick to it. Once you know what's in your kitchen, look for weekly sales or Rollbacks at your local grocery stores, and plan your grocery-shopping trip around the best deals. Remember, the biggest discount does not always mean the lowest price. So be a savvy shopper, and compare prices between different brands of the same product. Buying in bulk and freezing is a great savings strategy. Once you have your shopping list, stick to it and only buy the essentials.
4. Plan for leftovers. One of the best ways to stretch a food budget is to make enough food for more than one meal. Making a large dish like a casserole or doubling a recipe will save you time on busy nights and make the best use out of a few inexpensive ingredients. As a bonus, having leftovers around will keep you from having to run out for fast food or expensive takeout.
5. Have a "top five" list of ingredients. Many popular recipes include a common list of major ingredients. For example, if you know you can make three different dishes with chicken, potatoes, onion, carrots and tomatoes, you have three nights worth of dinners ready to go. (More if you plan to make leftovers.) Common ingredients make a week's worth of meals easier to plan, and many items are less expensive if bought in larger quantities.

Having a plan each week and organizing your meals ahead of time will help keep you on budget. It can take some practice, but carefully planning your meals in creative ways to limit the number of ingredients you have to buy will help stretch your valuable food dollars.