

Eating well for less: Shop smart & reduce food waste

A varied and balanced diet is important for health and doesn't need to be expensive. The cost-of-living increase and getting value for money is a concern for many people so read on to learn how to save money while still enjoying a healthy diet and avoiding unnecessary food waste.



The Eatwell Guide shows the five recommended food groups and how much from each group we need to eat over a day or week for a healthy balanced diet

<https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/food-guidelines-and-food-labels/the-eatwell-guide/>

Some information might not apply if you have been advised by a Healthcare Professional to follow a particular diet

Balance your diet with lower cost options

Fruit & veg: “wonky” and loose produce are cheaper, some items are more widely available and cost less when available “in season” e.g. strawberries during summer. See: <https://www.bda.uk.com/food-health/your-health/sustainable-diets/seasonal-fruit-and-veg-a-handly-guide.html>

Protein swaps: swap some meat for beans, lentils or chickpeas, which are cheaper but full of protein plus fibre which helps us to stay full for longer. Add to soups, Bolognese or chilli. See meat-free recipe ideas: https://www.bbc.co.uk/food/collections/vegetarian_dinner_ideas

Tinned, dried & frozen: meat, fish, beans, lentils, fruits & vegetables that are tinned, dried or frozen are often as nutritious as fresh items, last longer and often cost much less. Dried herbs and spices are cheaper and last a long time if stored correctly. Milk and cheese can be frozen.

Items with a longer shelf-life: buy in bulk or when on offer, stock up on products like tinned meats or fish, dried pasta, rice, noodles, tinned fruit & vegetables, and breakfast cereals. Have a few simple “store cupboard” recipes you can add into your routine, e.g. curries, soups, pasta sauces. See here for ideas: https://www.bbc.co.uk/food/collections/raid_the_storecupboard

Prepared foods: pre-grated cheese, pre-cut fruit & vegetables or pre-flavoured meats & fish are usually more expensive. Buy whole unprocessed foods to chop and prepare at home and keep a few favourite herbs & spices in stock to flavour them to your taste.

Batch-cook: make use of items on offer to double-up your recipe and freeze half for another day. This works well for tomato sauces, curries, lasagne, chilli, cottage pie, soups and stews.

Packed lunches: preparing packed lunches instead of buying lunch out of the house can save money. Remember to include something from each of the main food groups, plus a drink and make sure to keep your lunch cool and safe until you're ready to eat. For ideas how to make a healthy packed lunch see: <https://www.bda.uk.com/resource/healthy-packed-lunches.html>

Love your leftovers

Even small amounts of leftovers can be used in another meal, including packed lunches. Cool leftovers as quickly as possible then store in the fridge for up to two or three days (only one day for cooked rice). For ideas to use up leftovers see: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/food/collections/leftovers>

Shop smart & save money

Meal planning: decide your meals for a few days in advance (even if only your main meals), based on items you might already have then follow a shopping list for any additional items.

Reduced items: After seasonal holidays is a good time to pick up a variety of reduced items inc. meat, fish, poultry, cheeses, fruits and vegetables. Check packaging to see if you could freeze it.

Special offers: check the unit price per 100g / 100mls on shelf labelling to make sure it is a good deal compared to similar items or the usual price. Consider sharing special offers e.g. Buy One Get One Free or 3-for-2s etc. with friends or family and splitting the cost between you.

Reduce food waste

Portion sizes: save money and reduce waste by preparing recommended portion sizes of ingredients / meals. Measure portions of rice, pasta and other grains before cooking rather than tip straight into a pan. See: <https://www.nutrition.org.uk/creating-a-healthy-diet/portion-sizes/>

Use-by dates: these are a **safety measure** and are often seen on items that go off quickly e.g. meat, fish, ready-prepared salads and vegetables. **Do not eat fresh foods past the Use-by date even if they look and smell fine, you can't smell the bugs that cause food poisoning.** You can lengthen a Use-by date by cooking or freezing raw foods before the date expires (follow the packaging instructions, some items are not suitable for home freezing and some should be frozen on the day of purchase).

Best Before dates: these are a **quality measure** rather than a safety measure and are seen on a wide range of food items. Don't throw away foods before you need to. Eggs should be eaten within a couple of days of the Best Before date but other foods can be eaten after the Best Before date if they look and smell fine and there is no visible mould.

Freezing: if you can't use fresh produce before it will go off, consider freezing it. Cut up fruit & veg and store in freezer bags, silicone food pouches or foil containers. Grate or cut up cheese and store in small portions. Freeze soups, stocks or sauces in ice cube trays. Frozen sliced bread can be defrosted in advance or toasted from frozen. Check how to freeze foods and how long various items can stay frozen: https://www.bbc.co.uk/food/articles/how_to_freeze

More tips for reducing food waste: <https://www.foodsavvy.org.uk/>

Find our other "Eating well for less" information sheets (budget-friendly recipes and information about food banks and financial support for food) here:

<https://nwknowledge.nhs.uk/content-category/clinical-information/other-specialties/dietetics-nutrition-and-blood/eating-well/>