

Bulletin #4330, Planning Thrifty Meals for Small Families

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Thrifty Meals for Small Families

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There are ways to provide nutritious meals for couples

and small families while keeping food costs down. We planned two weeks of menus to start you off and included recipes for many of the dishes in additional bulletins in this series. These menus are easy on the budget and are planned so that fat, sugar, and salt are limited. The menu ideas can help you use your food dollars or food stamps wisely.

The menus included in this fact sheet are for those who are in good health. If you have special dietary requirements, please consult your health provider. Eating well can help keep you healthy and even improve your health. If you do need to follow a special diet for certain health conditions, check with your medical care provider before changing your diet.

The sample meals show how to plan nutritious, low-cost meals. But only you can plan menus that are exactly right for you. Your menus should fit your food likes and dislikes, and match your own eating pattern. Your menus should also provide for any special diet needs you have. Your own menu can include your favorite recipes, and they can match your time, energy, and interest in cooking.

Start with menu planning

Planning menus is the first step to eating well on a budget. There are some big advantages to making a plan:

- **A plan can help you take advantage of special sales.** Check your newspaper for special sales that fit your budget. Meat can take a big bite out of your food dollar. Watch for special sales on meat, poultry, and fish, and plan your meals around them. Buying produce in season can also help you save money.
- **A plan can help you cut down on impulse buying at the store.** Those impulse buys often aren't healthy or nutritious. Chances are that some foods, like pastries, sweets, candy, and snack chips, are high in price and calories and low in nutrients. Impulse buys may be expensive non-food items, too. Either way, they can really add to your grocery bill.
- **A plan can help you avoid waste.** It lets you know the right kind of food and package size to buy to fit your needs.
- **A plan can help you save time.** You won't have to go back to the store to buy foods you forgot if you shop with a list. Save your time for things you enjoy more.

Plan your own economy meals

You know the advantages of planning. But how can you put it all together into nutritious meals?

- Choose a variety of foods.
- Make meals healthier by avoiding too much fat, sugar, and salt.
- Use time-saving steps.
- Use a menu-planning checklist.

Know what your food budget is for the week.

For variety, the meal pattern below can serve as a guide. But other patterns are okay, too. A meal pattern helps you get the vitamins and minerals you need.

Choose a variety of food

Grains group

The grains group includes breads, cereals, rice, and pasta that are either whole-grain or enriched. These are important sources of B vitamins, which help you make energy from the foods you eat. Try to get half of your grain intake from whole grains—or at least 3 ounces of whole grains per day. Whole grains include brown rice, buckwheat, oatmeal, popcorn, millet, quinoa, whole wheat, barley, whole rye, and whole-grain cornmeal. Products made from whole grains include whole-wheat breakfast cereal flakes as well as whole-grain bread, crackers, pasta, and tortillas. Other important nutrients found in this food group include iron and protein. The fiber you get from whole grains prevents constipation and may help prevent cancer.

To stretch your food dollar, you can use grain products as side dishes, and you can combine them with small servings of meat, poultry, or fish in main dishes. Choose the low-fat items in this group. Limit the amount of high-fat pastries and sweets you consume from this food group.

Vegetables group

Dark green and deep yellow vegetables are especially high in nutrients and are good choices. The high levels of vitamin C and vitamin A in vegetables help your body stay healthy. These nutrients also function as antioxidants to help ward off major chronic diseases, such as cancer and heart disease. All vegetables are important to your diet and will provide nutrients, including fiber, for health, so aim to vary the variety of vegetable you eat. Fresh vegetables are less expensive when purchased in season. But if not in season, frozen or canned vegetables can be good buys. Some canned vegetables contain high amounts of sodium. Check nutrition labeling to make the best choices.

Fruits group

A variety of fruits are high in antioxidants, vitamin A, and vitamin C. The brighter in color, the higher level of antioxidant the fruit contains. Maine's native blueberries are well known for their high antioxidant content. Vitamin A is needed for healthy skin and vitamin C keeps gums and tissue healthy. Buy fruits in season to get the best buys without added sugar, fat, or salt. If not in season, choose dried, frozen or canned fruits, but go easy on fruit juices as they lack the fiber found in whole fruits.

Milk group

This group contains foods made from milk (such as cheese and yogurt) that are considered the best natural sources of calcium. (There are also foods made from milk that have little to no calcium, such as cream cheese, cream, and butter—they are not part of this food group.) Calcium is needed to keep bones and teeth healthy. Many people get less calcium than they need.

If you are lactose-intolerant, choose lactose-free products. Or if you cannot drink milk, choose foods from other food groups that are fortified with calcium to meet your nutrient needs. Check labels on cereals and juices to choose those with high amounts of calcium.

To make your food dollars count, choose less expensive forms of milk, yogurt and cheese. The healthier versions are the low or nonfat types. Drink fat-free milk at meals; put it on cereal and use in cooking. Some products, such as ice milk, may have little fat but will add calories to your diet because of the sugar that they contain. Enjoy these foods, but in smaller portions.

Meat and beans group

Foods included in this group are meats, poultry, fish, dry beans, dry peas, soybeans, lentils, eggs, nuts, and peanut butter. These foods not only provide protein, but are also sources of vitamins and minerals. Iron is an important nutrient found in this food group. Your meat and poultry choices should be low-fat or lean. Choose cooking methods such as broiling, baking, or grilling to reducing adding fat to your meal. Plant sources such as nuts, seeds, and beans contain healthy sources of fats and are less expensive than other choices from this food group. Eggs have very good quality protein and are low in cost.

Sample meal pattern	Example from the sample menu	Your own menus
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Morning

Fruit or juice	Grapefruit juice	_____
Protein source or egg	Scrambled egg on toasted roll	_____
Bread	Low-fat yogurt	_____
Milk (calcium)		_____

Noon

Main dish	Tomato, turkey, lettuce sandwich	_____
Vegetable or fruit	Split pea soup	_____
Bread	Fat-free milk	_____
Milk (calcium)		_____

Evening

Main dish	Braised beef	_____
Vegetables	Chopped broccoli	_____
Vegetable or salad	Apple wedges	_____
Fruit	Noodles	_____
Grain	Fat-free milk	_____
Milk (Calcium)		_____

Snack

Grain	Air-popped popcorn	_____
Fruit or Vegetable	Raisins	_____
Beverage	Water	_____

Oils

Have most of the fat in your diet come from fish, nuts, and vegetable oils such as canola, olive, soybean, corn, safflower, and sunflower oil. Examples of food items that contain oils include mayonnaise, certain salad dressings, and soft (tub or squeeze) margarine with no trans fat.

Solid fats include butter, shortening, stick margarine, lard, and meat fats and are not part of the oils category.

To cut down on the total fat in your diet,

- choose low-fat foods more often;
- fix foods the low-fat way: trim fat from meats; remove skin from poultry; bake, boil, or broil instead of frying; season vegetables with herbs and spices instead of butter and margarine; and
- go easy on fats added at the table—limit the amount of butter, margarine, or salad dressing you use.

Sugar and salt

Sugar has many names: syrup, molasses, and honey are some of them. Candy, jam, jelly, and many soft drinks are mostly sugar, too. Sugars are high in calories and low in nutrients. Limit them in your menu plan.

Much of the salt in our diets is added to foods during cooking and at the table. Try using less table salt and eating fewer salty foods. Many of these foods have salt in them:

- Canned and instant soups
- Processed food such as prepared meals and rice or noodle mixes
- Seasoning mixes
- Sauces such as soy sauce
- Snack foods such as salted chips and pretzels

Use time-saving steps

Not everyone loves to cook. Even those who enjoy cooking do not always have the time or the energy. Buying convenience foods or eating out can be costly. But there are ways to eat well at low cost without spending hours in the kitchen. Again, planning ahead will help you. Consider these ideas:

- Use the lower-cost convenience foods. Examples of some that are usually good buys include frozen orange juice concentrate, canned and frozen vegetables without seasonings, individually frozen meatballs, or chicken breasts and sauces.
- Plan some meals so you will have leftovers to use for later meals and snacks. Look at the sample menus for examples: some menu items appear two or three times in the week because of the amount that you make with the recipe. You plan to use the item more than once.
- Do most of your cooking for the week on one or two days and freeze or store some of the food. Then enjoy being able to just heat and eat for the rest of the week.
- Try homemade mixes to save time. (See our bulletin #4029, *Saving Money With Homemade Convenience Mixes*)

Use a menu planning checklist

To make sure you are off to a good start, review this menu-planning checklist.

Does your menu

- √ include leftovers?
- √ use store specials?
- √ have a variety of foods?
- √ emphasize grain products?
- √ rely on economical foods?

Thrifty menus for small families: Week 1

This menu is planned for two people. If your family is larger or smaller, adjust it to suit your needs. You can find recipes for the foods in bold print in the companion bulletins in the *Thrifty Meals for Small Families* series. Serving sizes are included in the recipes.

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Breakfast						
Orange (1) Bran flakes cereal (3 ounces) Whole-wheat toast (3 slices) Fat-free milk (2 cups)	Apple juice (1 cup) Eggs (2) Toast (4 slices) Fat-free milk (2 cups)	Banana (2) Oatmeal (1 cup dry) Fat-free milk (2 cups)	Apple juice (1 cup) Fat-free milk (2 cups) Applesauce muffins (3)	Banana (2) Oatmeal (1 cup dry) Applesauce muffins (3) Fat-free milk (2 cups)	Orange (2) Bran flakes cereal (3 ounces) Fat-free milk (2 cups)	Apple juice (1 cup) Scrambled eggs (2) Toasted whole- grain bread (2) Margarine (1 tbsp) Fat-free milk (2 cup)
Lunch						

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Braised turkey (6 oz) with gravy Baked potatoes (2 med) Green beans (2 cups) Biscuits (2) Pudding	Turkey-potato salad on lettuce leaves (2) Biscuits (2) Fat-free milk (2 cups)	Grilled cheese sandwich (4 oz) (2) Carrot sticks (2 cups) Fat-free milk (2 cups)	Taco salad Fat-free milk (2 cups)	Split pea soup (2 2/3 cups) Low-fat Cottage cheese (1 cup) on lettuce leaves (2) Whole-wheat crackers (14)	Tuna salad (6 oz) with lettuce on whole-wheat bread (4) Hot potato salad (2 cups) Fat-free milk (2 cups)	Split pea soup (2 2/3 cups) Mixed green salad with tomato (2.5 cups) Reduced-calorie dressing (2 tbsp) Fat-free milk (2 cups)
Dinner						
Cheeseburger w/ whole-grain hamburger roll (2 ounces cheese, 1/2 lb. lean ground beef or turkey) (2 rolls) Banana (2) Fat-free milk (2 cups)	Bean tamale pie (2 cups) Lettuce wedge (1/3 lb) with low-fat dressing (2 tbsp) Pear (2)	Turkey Spanish rice (2 cups) Green pepper sticks (1 pepper) Apple wedges (1) Biscuit (2)	Quick pizza (4 slices) Lettuce wedge (1/3 lb) Low-fat dressing (2 tbsp) Peach halves (4)	Beef and peppers Brown rice (2 cups cooked) Broccoli (2 cups raw or cooked) Apple cobbler (half) Fat-free milk (2 cups)	Spaghetti with tomato sauce Lettuce wedge (1/3/ lb) Low-fat dressing (2 tbsp) Garlic bread (2 slices)	Beef with noodles Broccoli (2 cups raw or cooked) Apple wedges (2 apples) Fat-free milk (2 cups)
Snack						
Toast (4 slices) with peanut butter (2 tbsp)	Whole-wheat crackers (14) Fat-free milk (2 cups)	Applesauce muffins (2) Fat-free milk (2 cups)	Apple (2) Cheddar cheese cubes (2 ounces)	Air-popped popcorn (8 cups popped) Fat-free milk (2 cups)	Apple cobbler (half) Fat-free milk (2 cups)	Air-popped popcorn (8 cups popped) Fat-free milk (2 cups)

Thrifty menus for small families: Week 2

This menu is planned for two people. If your family is larger or smaller, adjust it to suit your needs. You can find recipes for the foods in bold print in the companion bulletins in the *Thrifty Meals for Small Families* series. Serving sizes are included in the recipes.

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Breakfast						

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Toasted Oat cereal (3 ounces) Pears, canned (2 cups) Fat-free milk (2 cups)	Orange quarters (2) Oatmeal (1 cup dry) Fat-free milk (2 cups)	Banana (2) Toasted oat cereal (3 ounces) Fat-free milk (2 cups)	Orange quarters (2) Scrambled eggs (2) with cheese (2 ounces) Whole-wheat toast (4 slices) Margarine (1 tbsp) Fat-free milk (2 cups)	Whole-wheat Toast (4 slices) Peanut butter (3 tbsp) Melon (2 cups) Fat-free milk (2 cups)	Orange quarters (1) Oatmeal (1 cup dry) Applesauce muffins (2) Fat-free milk (2 cups)	Eggs (2) Lean ham (2 ounces) Cheese (2 ounces) Toasted whole-grain rolls (2) Apple juice (1 cup)
Lunch						
Roast Pork (5 ounces) Baked potatoes (2 large) Margarine (1 tbsp) Celery-carrot salad (1 1/3 cups) Fat-free milk (2 cups)	Pork fajitas (4) Melon wedges (2 cups) Fat-free milk (2 cups)	Pork sandwich (2) (4.5 ounces pork, 4 slices whole-wheat bread) Tomato slices Lettuce Low-fat mayonnaise (2 tbsp) Carrots (2 cups raw or cooked) Fat-free milk (2 cups)	Barbecue beef sandwich (2) Potato salad (1 1/2 cups)	Ham and cheese sandwich (2 ounces cheese, 2 ounce lean ham, 4 slices, whole-wheat bread) Broccoli soup (2 cups) Carrot-raisin bars (6)	Vegetable fried rice (2 cups) Canned peaches (2 cups) Fat-free milk (2 cups)	Quick pizza (4 slices) Pears (2 cups) Fat-free milk (2 cups)
Dinner						
Cheeseburger on roll (4 ounces cheese, 1/2 lb lean ground beef, 2 whole-wheat hamburger rolls, tomato slices, lettuce) Creole beans (2 cups)	Sesame fish Boiled potatoes (2 med) Margarine (1 tbsp) Chopped kale (2 cups) Fat-free milk (2 cups)	Spaghetti with 4 ounces ground beef or ground turkey Cooked pasta (2 cups) Cucumber slices (1 cup) Fat-free milk (2 cups)	Vegetable Fried Rice (2 cups) Apple slices (2 apples) Cheddar cheese cubes (2 ounces)	Stove-top beans Chopped kale (2 cups) Whole-wheat dinner roll (2) Baked Apple (2) Fat-free milk (2 cups)	Bean tamale Pie (2 cups) Green beans (12 cups) Whole-wheat dinner roll (2) Fat-free milk (2 cups)	Noodles (2 cup cooked) Stove top beans (2 cups) Apple slices (2 apples) Carrot-raisin bars (6) Fat-free milk (2 cups)
Snack						

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Graham crackers (4) Fat-free milk (2 cups)	Popcorn (8 cups popped) Raisins (1/2 cup)	Whole-wheat crackers (14) Melon (2 cups)	Carrot-raisin bars (6) Fat-free milk (2 cups)	Graham crackers (4) with peanut butter (3 tbsp) Fat-free milk (2 cups)	Popcorn (8 cups popped) Raisins (1/2 cup)	Applesauce muffins (3) Fat-free milk (2 cups)

See the other bulletins in the Thrifty Meals for Small Families series:

- [Ideas for Planning Thrifty Menus \(#4331\)](#)
- [Buying Food for Thrifty Small Families \(#4332\)](#)
- [Thrifty Recipes: Main Dishes \(#4333\)](#)
- [Thrifty Recipes: Salads and Soups, Breads and Desserts \(#4334\)](#)

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