

Planning a week of meals

Easy · 20 min a week · Free

Once a week, check what's already in your fridge and cupboards, look at the store's sale ad, and plan five dinners that use them, including at least one big batch you'll eat twice. Then shop from that list. It's the single biggest grocery money-saver.

YOU'LL NEED

- ☐ A five-day planner: paper, a notes app, or Iowa State's free printable
- ☐ Ten minutes looking in your fridge and cupboards
- ☐ Your store's weekly ad or app

WHAT TO KNOW

- 1 **Look at your week first.** Do you need quick meals, something for a potluck, or a slow-cooker day? Iowa State's planner has five days with no dates, so you can swap the order as the week changes.
- 2 **Shop your kitchen.** Check the fridge, freezer and cupboard for food that needs to be used up, write it under "on hand," and plan meals around it.
- 3 **Check the sales.** Use the store's ad or app and work sale items into the week's meals.
- 4 **Plan for leftovers on purpose.** Make a big pot of spaghetti Monday, and put it on the plan again later in the week so it doesn't go to waste.
- 5 **Check the food groups.** See whether most meals have something from each food group; that's the simplest way to make the week healthy.
- 6 **Prep once, use all week.** Brown and freeze ground beef, cook and chop chicken, or dice and cook onions and peppers, then freeze them in bags for later.
- 7 **Know what you're aiming for.** USDA's Thrifty Food Plan, its estimate for a healthy diet cooked at home, is about \$58.50 a week for a woman and \$73.60 for a man ages 20 to 50, as of August 2026.

Watch out Buying fresh produce you never cook is the classic plan-killer. Buy what you need and use perishables like fresh fruits and vegetables before they spoil. Frozen and canned vegetables are a cheap backup.

DAD NOTE *Twenty minutes on Sunday saves you from the 7 p.m. drive-through. Plan for leftovers and you've only cooked three times for five dinners.*

Full lesson: aptkeys.com/your-place/cooking-on-a-budget/planning-a-week-of-meals/

Checked October 3, 2026. Sources: Iowa State University Extension; U.S. Department of Agriculture.