

10 Tips: Meal Planning to Save Money

By Kati Neville

In my recent [podcast on school lunches](#), I discussed a new government report that estimates food and beverage companies spend \$1.6 billion dollars annually marketing their products to teens and children. That's 1,600 million dollars per year! It's a lot of money and the implications for our children's health and nutrition are concerning.

But if these companies spend \$1.6 billion marketing to kids, what do they spend to persuade you and me? Most moms control all the household food-buying decisions and have more than a \$2.00 allowance at their disposal. No doubt these companies spend tens of billions more.

For those of you who hate (not too strong a word) meal planning or are less than diligent about it, here's my advice: Make your peace with it. Because meal planning to save money is your best defense against the billion dollar budgets and full time staff urging you to spend, spend, spend.

Tough love.

The good news is that meal planning is not difficult. It does take a little time. But with a plan in hand, you'll be much less tempted to veer off course and blow the budget. Here are some strategies to keep in mind:

1. **Set a budget.** The average family with school-age children [spends over \\$9,000 on food annually](#). That's about \$175.00 per week, \$25.00 per day. How much do you spend compared to this average? Examine your food expenses and make realistic savings goals.
2. **Plan weekly.** You don't need a crystal ball to predict everyone expects dinner. This isn't a surprise so don't wing it. Instead, *plan* for it. In doing so, you will gain independence from expensive restaurant meals and last minute dinners from a box. Do it weekly.
3. **Use it up.** Visit the pantry, fridge, or freezer before you plan. Look for leftover or abandoned items to use up. Give priority to high cost, perishable foods like berries, nuts, cheese, and meat. Then target spices and canned goods. Select 1-2 items and seek recipes that use them.
4. **Plan with grocery store ads and sales cycles.** Proceed with caution here. Planning meals with advertised specials, or "loss leaders," can save money. However, studies by the [Cornell Food and Brand Lab](#) show that multi-unit pricing (such as, "3 for \$3" or "10 for \$10") and other promotions encourage *over-buying*—and not just a little. Customers purchased 30 - 105% more! Buy only what you will use. Remember, it's not a deal if it's wasted.

5. **Buy in bulk. Buy generic.** Twelve cents of every food dollar buys advertising and packaging. Can picky eaters truly tell the difference between store and name brand mozzarella in lasagna? Will the chili suffer if you use bulk bin spices? Use bulk or store-brand products where picky eaters are less likely to detect them.
6. **Consider low-energy cooking methods.** [Slow cookers](#) and stovetops are the most energy efficient cooking methods according Paul Scheckel, the author of [The Home Energy Diet](#). Select one of these cooking methods weekly and save on your electricity bill too.
7. **Scale back your tastes.** We're not in a sun dried tomato economy anymore, folks. And with the world population projected to increase to 9 billion by mid-century, I expect food prices will continue to rise. Serving meat at every meal may not be practical or economical. But if you just can't bring yourself to love [lentils](#), beans, grains, and "rabbit food" (as my dad says), then dust off grandma's recipes for strata, soup, and hash. These simple heirloom recipes are designed to make a little meat go a long way and stretch you food dollar.
8. **Include snacks and sides.** According to the [Consumer Expenditures Survey](#), the largest single category of spending on food at home is NOT meat, dairy, fresh produce, or cereal/bakery items. It's "OTHER." It's products like soda, fruit juice, snack crackers, boxed side dishes, and frozen pizzas. So after you plan meals, think about how you can reduce your reliance on [convenience foods](#). Do the kids really need 3 glasses of juice at dinner? And what about those expensive 100 calorie-pack snacks? Consider buying the larger warehouse-size and making your own snack packs. Or buy it to [split with friends](#).
9. **Cook once, eat twice.** Lindsay calls these meals [planned overs](#), because you intentionally plan to use your leftovers. I do this all the time too, because it saves time. It's easy to make extra rice, for example. Serve it one night as a side, with [Mango-Cranberry Chicken](#) over it. And then use the rest in other meals throughout the week, like Egg Fried Rice, Black Bean Burritos, or [Lentil Rice Soup](#). Spend some time learning how to store your leftovers properly, so you can safely extend their shelf life to prevent food born illness.
10. **Make-ahead meals.** Last but not least, integrate make-ahead meals into your routine. Whether using recipes from [Fix, Freeze, Feast](#) or another source, remember that even a few meals in the freezer will save you money.

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Kati Neville co-wrote the best selling cookbook, [Fix, Freeze, Feast](#) with Lindsay Tkacsik. Ms. Neville shares free money and time saving tips regularly, by blogging on [The Forklift](#) and on [The Saver's Kitchen](#) podcast at [SaversKitchen.com](#). Kati speaks and teaches classes to women's and mom's groups. Learn more at [KatiNeville.com](#).