

Healthy Dinners



Creating a budget-friendly dinner takes some planning. To save time and money, take an hour during the weekend to plan weeknight dinners and create a shopping list. Here are four simple dinner ideas to get you started.

Stir-Fry

- In a large wok or frying pan, heat 1 to 2 tablespoons of canola oil over medium-high heat. Add 6 ounces of tofu, skinless chicken pieces, or lean beef, and cook several minutes until browned. Then stir in thinly sliced vegetables, such as onions, broccoli, peppers, cauliflower, garlic, and carrots, and continue to cook for about 5 minutes until the veggies are slightly softened. Add flavor with low-sodium soy sauce, rice vinegar, or red pepper flakes.
- This recipe makes two servings. Serve with $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of rice per person. Try brown rice for extra fiber.
- **Money saving tip:** Choose whole, in-season vegetables and slice them at home.

Pasta and Meat Sauce

- Cook pasta according to the package directions. Try whole grain pasta for added fiber. Serve 1 cup cooked pasta per person.
- For the sauce, cook 85% or 90% lean ground beef. If you buy ground beef that is less than 85% lean, drain the grease from the beef after cooking. Then rinse the cooked beef in a colander under cool water. One pound of ground beef will serve four people. Mix the cooked ground beef with canned or jarred tomato sauce. Serve the pasta and meat sauce with seasonal vegetables on the side.
- **Money saving tip:** Buy several boxes of whole wheat pasta when it is on sale.

Chili

- In a large pot, combine cooked beans (like black, kidney, pinto, or navy beans) with canned tomatoes and chopped vegetables such as onions, garlic, peppers, and mushrooms. Add cooked ground turkey, chicken, or lean beef, or try cubed, firm tofu. For extra fiber, add leftover whole grains, like cooked brown rice, barley, or whole wheat couscous.

- Top bowls of chili with small portions of shredded cheese, low-fat sour cream, and black olives.
- **Money saving tips:**
 - Dry beans are much cheaper per ounce than canned beans. Be sure to soak dry beans for several hours and cook them before making chili or other dishes.
 - Buy a small block of cheese and shred it at home.
 - To save extra money, choose one or two toppings at most.

Tuna Casserole

- Classic tuna casserole uses simple ingredients you can stock in your kitchen or pantry: canned tuna, low-fat milk, pasta, and bread (for making crumbs). Try whole wheat bread and pasta for an extra fiber boost.
- Add fresh, seasonal vegetables or frozen chopped broccoli or peas.
- For extra flavor, use a splash of chicken or vegetable stock. Instead of using packaged stock, make your own once a month and freeze it in small portions.
- **Money saving tips:** Look for sales on larger (12-ounce) cans of tuna, frozen vegetables, and pasta. Also check out store brands. They tend to cost less than name brands.

Basic Chicken Stock

Makes 6 quarts.

Ingredients:

5 pounds whole chicken, cut into pieces
4 medium yellow onions, peeled and quartered
4 celery stalks, cut into thirds
6 carrots, peeled and halved
Handful of fresh parsley sprigs
Handful of fresh thyme
Handful of fresh dill
10 peeled garlic cloves, cut in half
Salt and black pepper to taste

Directions:

Place all ingredients in a 16-quart stockpot and add 7 quarts cool water. Bring to a boil. Lower heat and simmer for about 4 hours, uncovered. Strain the stock through a colander into a large bowl or pot.

Put hot stock in smaller containers, and store them overnight in refrigerator. The next day, remove visible fat from the surface of the stock and discard. Stock can be stored in refrigerator for up to 7 days. Freeze extra stock in small, sealed containers for up to 3 months.

Tip: After straining the stock, reserve the chicken and carrots in a separate container. You can use them in soups, stews, or casseroles, or make chicken salad.

