

BRIGHTER FUTURES

Eating Well on a Budget

Practical ideas for everyday meals

Simple food, flexible choices, less waste

This guide builds on learning from our earlier Healthy Eating Road Shows and has been completely revised using current UK healthy-eating and food-safety guidance.

Revised by Brighter Futures - August 2026

Eating well without making life complicated

Eating well does not require expensive ingredients, special “diet” foods or a perfect meal every day. A few reliable staples, some planning and flexible recipes can make food both nutritious and affordable.

The UK Eatwell Guide looks at the balance of food we eat *over time*, rather than insisting that every individual meal is perfectly proportioned. The main ideas are straightforward:

- **Fruit and vegetables:** aim for at least 5 portions of a variety each day. Fresh, frozen and canned all count.
- **Starchy foods:** base meals around foods such as potatoes, bread, rice, pasta and other starchy carbohydrates; choose higher-fibre or wholegrain versions where practical.
- **Protein foods:** include beans, lentils, chickpeas, eggs, fish, meat or other protein foods. Beans and pulses are particularly useful when money is tight.
- **Dairy or alternatives:** include some milk, yoghurt, cheese or suitable alternatives, choosing lower-fat and lower-sugar options where appropriate.
- **Oils and spreads:** choose unsaturated types and use them in small amounts.
- **Drinks:** as a general guide, aim for 6 to 8 cups or glasses of fluid a day. Water, lower-fat milk, tea and coffee can all count.

A useful rule

Do not judge your diet by one meal. Look at the pattern across a day or a week. A simple meal of beans on toast is still food; add some fruit or vegetables when you can and move on.

Foods that are high in fat, salt and sugar are not “forbidden”, but the Eatwell Guide recommends having them less often and in smaller amounts.

Shop with a plan - but keep it flexible

Planning is most useful when it prevents waste rather than turning meals into a rigid timetable. Before shopping, look at what is already in the cupboard, fridge and freezer. Then plan a handful of meals that share ingredients.

- **Write a shopping list.** It is easier to avoid unnecessary purchases when you know what the week needs.
- **Use supermarket own-brand or value ranges.** The cheaper version of a basic ingredient is often perfectly adequate.
- **Use frozen, canned and dried foods.** They last longer and can reduce waste. Frozen vegetables and canned vegetables in water can be very useful.
- **Let beans and pulses make meals go further.** Lentils, chickpeas and beans can replace some meat or simply add bulk and protein to soups, chilli, curry and pasta sauces.
- **Buy larger packs only when you will genuinely use them.** A “bargain” that ends up in the bin is not a saving.
- **Freeze what you cannot use in time.** Portioning food before freezing makes it easier to defrost only what you need.

Think in ingredients, not isolated meals

One bag of frozen mixed vegetables can appear in a curry, pasta sauce, omelette, soup or rice dish. A tin of tomatoes can become a pasta sauce, chilli, stew or soup. Leftover roast vegetables can go into an omelette or be blended into soup.

Where the savings often are

Staple foods, frozen vegetables, beans and lentils, eggs, canned tomatoes, oats and own-brand products are often more useful to a tight budget than highly marketed “healthy” products.

A useful low-cost cupboard and freezer

You do not need all of these. The aim is to have a small collection of ingredients that can be combined in several different ways.

Ingredient	Why it earns its place	Ways to use it
Porridge oats	Long shelf life; filling starchy food.	Porridge, overnight oats, topping for fruit.
Potatoes, rice or pasta	Inexpensive base for many meals.	Jacket potatoes, curries, pasta dishes, soups.
Beans, lentils or chickpeas	Low-cost protein and fibre; canned versions are convenient.	Chilli, curry, soup, salads, pasta sauce, baked potato topping.
Eggs	Flexible protein food that cooks quickly.	Omelette, scrambled eggs, fried rice, boiled eggs.
Canned tomatoes	Cheap base ingredient with a long shelf life.	Pasta sauce, chilli, curry, soup, stew.
Frozen mixed vegetables	No peeling or chopping; use only what you need.	Rice dishes, curry, pasta, soup, omelettes.
Canned fish	Useful alternative to fresh fish; stores well.	Sandwiches, pasta, potato topping, salads.
Milk, yoghurt or alternatives	Useful for breakfast and simple meals.	Porridge, cereal, sauces, snacks.
Herbs and spices	Help the same basic ingredients taste different.	Curry powder, mixed herbs, paprika, pepper, garlic.

Fruit and vegetables: frozen and canned options can be just as useful as fresh. For canned fruit, choose fruit in natural juice where possible; for canned vegetables, choose versions in water without added salt where available.

Five meals built from ordinary ingredients

These are not strict recipes. Quantities can be adjusted according to appetite, household size and what you already have.

1. Lentil and tomato pasta

Pasta • canned tomatoes • lentils • frozen or fresh vegetables • herbs

Cook the pasta. Warm tomatoes, lentils and vegetables together with herbs or garlic. Add a splash of water if the sauce becomes too thick. Mix with the pasta. Grated cheese can be added if you have it.

2. Bean and vegetable chilli

Beans • canned tomatoes • onion or frozen vegetables • chilli/cumin/paprika • rice or potato

Warm the vegetables, tomatoes and beans together with your chosen spices. Simmer until the flavours combine. Serve with rice or over a baked potato.

3. Egg and vegetable rice

Cooked rice • eggs • frozen mixed vegetables • a little oil • seasoning

Cook the vegetables in a pan. Add cooked rice and heat thoroughly. Push everything to one side, scramble the egg in the pan, then mix together. If using soy sauce, remember it can be high in salt, so a little is usually enough.

4. Jacket potato with a quick topping

Potato • beans, tuna, cottage cheese or leftover chilli • side vegetables if available

Bake or microwave the potato until fully cooked. Add whichever topping you have. This is a useful way to turn a small amount of leftover food into another meal.

5. Porridge with fruit

Porridge oats • milk, alternative or water • fresh, frozen or canned fruit

Cook the oats with your chosen liquid. Add fruit at the end. Cinnamon can add sweetness and flavour without needing much added sugar.

Make one meal do more

Cooking once and eating more than once can save both money and time. The useful trick is to make a basic dish that can change slightly rather than eating exactly the same plate three days running.

Start with	Use it today	Change it tomorrow
Tomato, lentil and vegetable sauce	Serve with pasta.	Add beans and spices for chilli; thin with stock for soup.
Cooked vegetables	Serve with potatoes or rice.	Use in an omelette, soup or pasta dish.
Cooked rice	Serve with curry or chilli.	Use promptly in fried rice, following safe cooling and storage guidance.
Bean chilli	Serve with rice.	Use as a baked potato topping or fill a wrap.

Use the freezer as part of the plan

If you cook a larger amount, divide spare portions before freezing. Label them with what they are and the date. Follow storage and defrosting instructions on food packaging where provided.

Cooking in bulk is only a saving if the extra food is actually eaten. If freezer space is limited, cooking two portions instead of one may be more useful than making a huge batch.

Spend less without taking chances with food safety

Reducing waste is useful, but food safety comes first. The Food Standards Agency makes an important distinction between **use-by** dates and **best before** dates.

Use-by = safety

Food should not be eaten after its use-by date unless it was cooked or frozen on or before that date. If food is cooked before the use-by date, cool it, refrigerate it and eat it within 48 hours, or freeze it for later. Once defrosted, use it within 24 hours.

Best before = quality

Food past its best-before date may still be safe to eat, although the quality may have declined. Check the storage instructions and use your senses where appropriate.

A few habits that cut waste

- Put foods with the shortest dates where you can see them.
- Freeze bread, cooked meals and suitable ingredients before they spoil.
- Label frozen portions so they do not become mystery containers at the back of the freezer.
- Plan one “use-it-up” meal each week for vegetables, cooked food and opened ingredients that need using.
- Follow the storage instructions on the packet, particularly once it has been opened.

Small changes that are worth making

There is no need to overhaul everything at once. A few changes that fit your budget and routine are more likely to last.

- Add a handful of frozen vegetables to a meal you already make.
- Replace part of the meat in a chilli, curry or pasta sauce with lentils or beans.
- Keep one or two easy meals in the cupboard or freezer for days when cooking feels like too much.
- Use food labels to compare similar products. Colour-coded labels can make it easier to spot foods that are higher in saturated fat, sugar or salt.
- Drink regularly through the day. For most people, 6 to 8 cups or glasses of fluid is a useful general guide.
- If takeaways are a frequent expense, identify one very easy home meal you can make in the same amount of time.

This is not a weight-loss guide

Eating well is about giving your body a useful balance of food and making everyday choices that are manageable. Brighter Futures does not use “good food / bad food” language or promote crash diets.

When individual advice is important

This booklet gives general information only. If you have diabetes, kidney disease, food allergies, swallowing difficulties, a digestive condition, are pregnant, are recovering from illness, have been advised to follow a particular diet, or are concerned about your weight or nutrition, seek individual advice from an appropriate health professional such as your GP or a registered dietitian.

About this guide

This resource was developed by Brighter Futures as a practical community guide. It draws on learning from our earlier Healthy Eating Road Shows project, while replacing the weight-focused language and older nutrition claims used in some previous materials.

The health and food-safety information in this edition was checked against current UK public guidance in August 2026.

Main sources

- [NHS - The Eatwell Guide](#)
- [NHS - Eating a balanced diet](#)
- [NHS - 5 A Day: what counts?](#)
- [NHS - Water, drinks and hydration](#)
- [NHS - How to read food labels](#)
- [Food Standards Agency / GOV.UK - Best before and use-by dates](#)
- [Cumbria, Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust - Healthy eating on a budget](#)

Brighter Futures

Wellbeing, creativity and connection in East Sussex.

This guide may be downloaded and shared for personal, educational and community use. Please keep the Brighter Futures attribution with the document.