

Holiday Dinners on a Budget

Even during difficult economic times, it is possible to gather for a holiday dinner without breaking the bank. Here are some money-saving tips for planning the meal.

Money-saving Tips

- **Have a plan:** Decide how many people will be at dinner and how much you want to spend per person. Make a grocery list for shopping. Many people assume they will remember what is needed, but then end up buying too much or buying more expensive items.
- **Buy in bulk:** Watch for sales at stores and wholesale markets. Instead of purchasing items just for dinner, buy bulk items that can be used in meals well past the holiday.
- **Be a smart shopper:** Off-brands or generics are inexpensive alternatives and they usually taste as good as name-brand items. Use coupons and look for "buy one, get one free" sales. Take advantage of free turkey or ham promotions; stores often give away turkeys or ham to customers who spend a certain amount of money on groceries. However, this is not a good deal if you spend more than you need to on groceries just to get the free item.
- **Limit the menu:** Instead of three types of pie and six different side dishes, choose one meat, one or two vegetables and one dessert.
- **Host a potluck:** Instead of one person doing all the shopping and preparation, have family members and guests contribute dishes so the cost is spread among everyone and no single person has to pay for everything.
- **Make it from scratch:** Convenience costs extra. Pre-made biscuits, bread and pie shells can usually be made more inexpensively at home.
- **Start with soup:** Soup is a filling starter that can be made very economically for a large group. Consider using fall vegetables to make a carrot-ginger or butternut squash soup.
- **Turkey or ham:** During the holidays, it is usually easy to find ham and turkeys at good prices. If buying a turkey, remember, it is more economical to buy a whole turkey than just a turkey breast. If making ham, it is better to get it at a grocery store and cook it yourself than it is to purchase a ready-baked or "spiral" ham that many shops advertise. Keep leftover meats, freeze and use in casseroles or soup after the holiday.

- **Forget the meat:** If you are on a tight budget, consider serving a different main dish. Pasta with a good homemade sauce is inexpensive and very filling. It may not be traditional, but many families unite over large pasta dinners. Holiday meals are not just about food but about people gathering together.
- **Vegetables:** Per pound, frozen vegetables are cheaper than fresh or canned. Frozen vegetables are also healthier than canned vegetables. Save money by simplifying preparation. Instead of making green bean casserole with several ingredients, consider serving green beans with a simple sauce of butter and balsamic vinegar.
- **Stuffing:** Boxed stuffing is usually on sale during the holidays. If you make it from scratch, save money by not using expensive ingredients like oysters. Use stale bread that might otherwise be thrown out rather than buying fresh bread and toasting it.
- **Side dishes:** In addition to limiting the number of side dishes, consider something less traditional but more filling and budget-friendly, such as rice and beans or macaroni and cheese.
- **Drinks:** Serve water, iced tea and coffee instead of cans of soda. Consider purchasing boxed wine instead of bottled. Many high-end winemakers now produce quality vintages in a box for about half the cost of a bottle. Pour the wine into a carafe to serve.
- **Dessert:** Do not purchase frozen pies unless they are sold at a budget price. Most frozen pies cost twice as much as homemade pies. Consider making an apple crisp instead of a pie to save on costs.
- **Dinner deals:** Some grocery stores offer very economical pre-made dinners that include everything from the main dish to the dessert. This may be an option for smaller groups because you can get a full variety of foods without having to over-buy individual items and have leftovers. But be careful to break down the price per person; it still may be more cost-effective to make everything at home.
- **Avoid disposables:** In addition to being environmentally friendly, choosing to use dishes, glasses and silverware (instead of paper plates and cups) saves money.
- **Downgrade décor:** Decorations can be one of the biggest holiday expenses. Forego store-bought decorations and use natural items, such as colorful fall leaves, pine cones and small pumpkins or gourds, placed around the base of a candle and used as a centerpiece. Let children make place cards or fall-themed decorations.

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