



EXTENSION

FCS-2432

Cooking for one or two

June 2026

Simple tips for healthy, easy meals

Cooking for one or two people can be challenging because many recipes and food packages are made for families. With simple planning and smart habits, you can cook healthy meals, save money, reduce food waste and maintain independence. These tips are helpful for people living alone, couples, older adults and young adults.

Build balanced meals

Table 1: Source: Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2025-2030.

Food group	Serving goals (based on a 2,000 Kcal/day)
Protein	1.2 - 1.6 grams of protein per kilogram of body weight per day; adjusting as needed based on individual caloric requirements
Dairy	3 servings; adjusting as needed based on individual caloric requirements
Vegetables	3 servings; adjusting as needed based on individual caloric requirements
Fruits	2 servings; adjusting as needed based on individual caloric requirements
Whole grains	2 - 4 servings; adjusting as needed based on individual caloric requirements

- A simple meal formula: Protein + Vegetable + Grain + Dairy + Optional fruit.
- Tip for older adults: Include protein at each meal and stay well-hydrated.

Meal planning made simple

- Shop your pantry, fridge and freezer first before shopping
- Plan 3 – 5 meals per week
- Keep meals flexible
- Use convenience foods, like pre-chopped vegetables, frozen or canned produce or rotisserie chicken, to save time or energy

Helpful pantry foods

- Canned proteins: beans, tuna or chicken
- Whole grains: rice, pasta or other whole grains
- Broths, canned tomatoes, seasonings
- Frozen fruits and vegetables

Right-sizing recipes

Most recipes are written for families. Right-sizing means changing the recipe to fit your needs.

- Cut recipes in half or thirds
- Measure ingredients carefully
- Smaller meals cook faster
- Right-sizing saves money and reduces food waste

Using leftovers the smart way

Leftovers are helpful when cooking for one or two people.

- Enjoy home-cooked meals without cooking every day
- Fewer dishes and less cleanup
- Cook once, eat more than once

Safely store leftovers

- Cover and label the container with the name of the food and the date
- Refrigerate within two hours (1 hour if over 90 F)
- Use refrigerated leftovers within four days
- Freeze extra food in meal-sized portions

Planned overs & reducing food waste

- Plan meals that share ingredients across the week
- Use small amounts of leftovers in flexible meals
- Make “use it up” meals like soups, stir-fries, bowls or omelets
- Repurpose leftovers:
 - Cooked chicken: tacos or chicken salad
 - Vegetables: soups, omelets or bowls
 - Rice or pasta: stir-fries or casseroles

Shopping strategies

- Compare unit prices
- Buy only what you will use

- Buy unpackaged produce (when cheaper) to avoid waste
- Convenience can save time and reduce waste

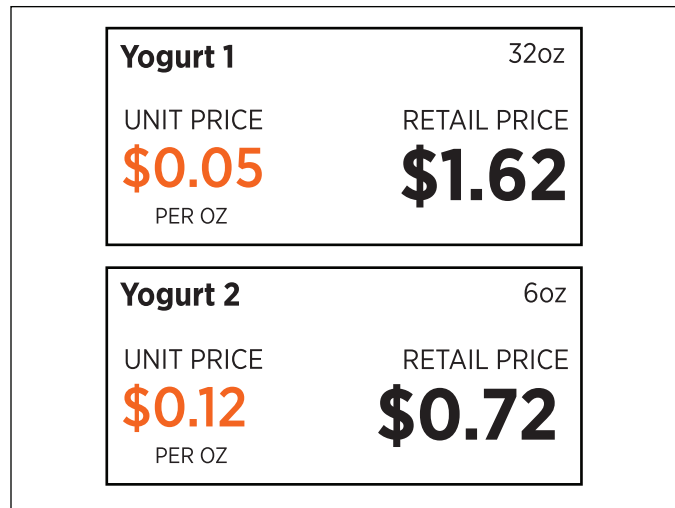


Figure 1: Unit pricing comparison. Rutgers NJAES (2026).

Know your food dates

- **Sell-by:** store display guidance, not safety
- **Best if used by:** quality, not safety
- **Use-by:** peak quality date, not safety
- **Freeze-by:** to maintain quality, not safety

Quality dates ≠ safety. Always rely on proper storage and handling.

Food safety basics

Follow these four steps to keep food safe:

- Clean: Wash hands and surfaces
- Separate: Keep raw foods apart
- Cook: Cook foods to safe temperatures
- Chill: Refrigerate food quickly

Food safety tips

- Watch the temperature danger zone (40–140 F)
- Reheat leftovers to 165 F
- When in doubt, throw it out

Freezer basics

- Keep freezer at 0 F or lower
- Freezing keeps food safe indefinitely, but quality declines over time

- Use airtight containers
- Freeze single-serving portions
- Freeze small amounts (broths, sauces) in ice cube trays

Easy cooking tools and methods

Use methods that save time and reduce dishes:

- Sheet-pan, skillet and one-pot meals
- Air fryer, toaster oven, microwave, mini slow cooker, single-burner induction cooktop

Budget-conscious strategies

- Buy high-quality proteins in smaller packages, or buy family-size packs and freeze them in smaller portions
- Choose seasonal produce when possible
- Fresh vs. frozen vs. canned: choose what fits your budget and reduces waste
- Use store loyalty apps, digital coupons, pick-up or delivery options

Making meals enjoyable

Cooking for yourself matters, try:

- Music, podcasts, or a clean and relaxing space
- Nicely plating your meal
- Trying new flavors and quick, rewarding recipes

Key takeaways

- Plan simple, flexible meals and use what you already have
- Right-size recipes and use leftovers or freezer portions to reduce waste
- Shop smart with unit pricing and proper storage to save money
- Follow basic food safety steps to keep meals safe
- Make cooking enjoyable with easy routines that fit your lifestyle



Peer Reviewed

Christi Evans

Assistant Extension Specialist

Nila Pradhananga

Assistant Professor, Nutritional Sciences

Taylor Conner

Extension Educator FCS and 4H



Scan the code or visit extension.okstate.edu/fact-sheets for more OSU Extension fact sheets.

EDUCATION EVERYWHERE FOR EVERYONE
Division of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources

Oklahoma State University, as an equal opportunity employer, complies with all applicable federal and state laws regarding non-discrimination. Oklahoma State University is committed to a policy of equal opportunity for all individuals and does not discriminate based on race, religion, age, sex, color, national origin, marital status, disability, or veteran status with regard to employment, educational programs and activities, and/or admissions.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Director of Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma. This publication is printed and issued by Oklahoma State University as authorized by the Vice President for Agricultural Programs and has been prepared and distributed at a cost of 20 cents per copy. 06 26 SB.