



FRESH START GUIDE

**Practical food skills for coming home,
starting over, and making your food
budget stretch.**

OUTSIDE EATS.ORG

WELCOME

Coming home comes with enough to figure out.

Food should not be one more mystery.

This guide is for people preparing for release, newly home, living in transitional housing, or rebuilding after incarceration. It focuses on simple food skills that can help you spend less, make meals with limited equipment, and find help when money is tight.

Outside Eats focuses on affordable plant foods because staples like beans, rice, oats, potatoes, pasta, lentils, vegetables, fruit, and peanut butter can help make a limited food budget go further. Use what works for you.

Important: This guide provides general educational information. Prices, food assistance programs, facility rules, and individual dietary needs vary. For medical or nutrition advice specific to you, talk with a qualified health professional.

WELCOME

Use the guide based on what you need today.

GETTING OUT SOON?

START WITH:

Before You Come Home
Your First 72 Hours

Pages 5-9

JUST CAME HOME?

START WITH:

The First Grocery Trip
Meal Formula
Food Help

Pages 5-9

VERY LITTLE MONEY?

START WITH:

Make Your Money Go Further
Budget Worksheets

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NO KITCHEN?

START WITH:

Equipment Guide
Microwave Meals
No-Cook Meals

Pages 5-9

USE THIS YOUR WAY

You can read the guide front to back, jump to the section you need, copy a worksheet, or share one page with someone else.

KEEP THIS NEARBY

Write in it. Circle things. Cross out foods you hate. Add prices from your local store. The more personal you make it, the more useful it becomes.

Start with what you have right now.

There is no right answer. This page helps you choose the most useful sections of the guide.

- ☐ Full kitchen
- ☐ Refrigerator
- ☐ Freezer
- ☐ Microwave
- ☐ Stove or oven
- ☐ Hot plate
- ☐ Electric kettle
- ☐ None of these yet

I need to feed this many people:

I have about this much for food this week:

Meals that may already be provided to me:

My biggest food concern right now is:

MAKIE IT YOURS

Circle your equipment. Write down the amount you can spend. You can come back to this page when your situation changes.

BEFORE YOU COME HOME

Food is part of your reentry plan.

Knowing where your next few meals are coming from is one less problem to solve.

MONEY

A simple food plan can help protect limited cash for transportation, housing, phone service, and other priorities.

ENERGY

Regular meals can make it easier to handle appointments, work, job searches, and daily responsibilities.

FAMILY

Knowing a few inexpensive meals can help when you are feeding more than yourself.

ROUTINE

Shopping, cooking, and planning meals can become part of a steady weekly routine.

THE GOAL

Not perfection. The goal is to know how you will eat today, tomorrow, and the next few days without spending more than you can afford.

Before-release food checklist

If you can answer even a few of these before release, your first week may feel more manageable.

- ☐ Find out where I will be staying.
- ☐ Ask what cooking equipment I will have access to.
- ☐ Find out whether meals are provided where I am staying.
- ☐ Identify one nearby grocery store or market.
- ☐ Identify one nearby food pantry or food bank.
- ☐ Learn where to apply for food assistance if I need it.
- ☐ Make a simple first-week grocery list.
- ☐ Figure out how I will get to the store.
- ☐ Identify one person or organization I can ask for help.

My first place to get food will be:

Someone I can contact if I need help:

Do not try to stock an entire kitchen.

Start with enough food for the next few days. You can build from there.

1

KNOW WHAT YOU HAVE

Check the kitchen, pantry, refrigerator, and any meals already provided.

2

PLAN 3 DAYS

Choose a few breakfasts, lunches, and dinners you can repeat.

3

BUY FLEXIBLE FOODS

Choose foods that can work in more than one meal.

4

SAVE SOME CASH

Do not spend your entire food budget on the first trip if you can avoid it.

THINK SHORT-TERM FIRST

A banana, oatmeal, rice and beans, a potato, or a simple sandwich can solve today. You can build a bigger pantry after you know your schedule, kitchen, and budget.

Your first grocery trip

Choose a small group of foods that can turn into several meals.

BREAKFAST

- Oats
- Bananas or another low-cost fruit
- Peanut butter

MEALS

- Rice
- Beans or lentils
- Pasta
- Tomato sauce
- Potatoes
- Frozen vegetables

EXTRAS

- Tortillas or bread
- One seasoning you like
- Salsa or another sauce

PRICES VARY

Use this as a starting list, not a promise about what groceries cost. Compare prices where you live and choose what you will actually eat.

My first grocery list

Estimate first.

Then write what you actually spent.

That helps the next trip.

ITEM	NEED IT?	ESTIMATE	ACTUAL
Oats		\$----	\$----
Rice		\$----	\$----
Beans / lentils		\$----	\$----
Potatoes		\$----	\$----
Pasta		\$----	\$----
Frozen vegetables		\$----	\$----
Peanut butter		\$----	\$----
Fruit		\$----	\$----
Tortillas / bread		\$----	\$----
Other: _____		\$----	\$----

The one thing I forgot last time:

The cheap-food hall of fame

Flexible foods that can work across breakfast, lunch ,and dinner.

BEANS

Protein+fiber • canned or dry

LENTILS

Fast-cooking • soups, pasta, bowls

RICE

Base for bowls, beans, vegetables

OATS

Breakfast • snacks • overnight oats

POTATOES

Microwave, bake, mash, or hash

PASTA

Fast base for beans and vegetables

PEANUT BUTTER

Shelf-stable • breakfast or sandwich

FROZEN VEG

Use only what you need • less waste

YOUR LIST MAY BE DIFFERENT

A cheap food is only a bargain if you will eat it and can prepare it. Add your own low-cost staples to this list.

Shop smarter, not perfectly

A few habits can matter more than finding the “perfect” grocery list.

CHECK UNIT PRICE

A larger package is not always cheaper. Compare cost per ounce, pound, or unit when the shelf label provides it.

TRY STORE BRANDS

Generic or store-brand basics can cost less and often work just as well in simple meals.

BUY WHAT YOU USE

Throwing food away costs more than buying a smaller amount you will actually eat.

COMPARE FROZEN + FRESH

Frozen produce can be useful when fresh food spoils before you can use it.

BUILD AROUND SALES

If a staple you use often is discounted and you have storage, adjust the week around it.

SHOP WITH A LIST

A simple list makes it easier to protect the money you planned for food.

The \$25-ish challenge

Prices change.

The skill is learning to build a useful basket around the money you have.

Choose a local store and try to build a basket around \$25. If your prices are higher or lower, that is useful information. The goal is not to hit the number exactly - it is to practice choosing flexible foods.

FOOD	STORE PRICE	WHAT I CAN MAKE
Oats	\$_____	Breakfast / snack
Rice	\$_____	Bowls / side
Beans or lentils	\$_____	Bowls / burritos / potatoes
Potatoes	\$_____	Meal base / side
Frozen vegetables	\$_____	Add to several meals
Peanut butter	\$_____	Breakfast / sandwich
Fruit	\$_____	Breakfast / snack
Other	\$_____	_____

My total:

If I had \$5 more, I would add:

My weekly food budget

A budget is a plan, not a punishment.

Money available for food this week: \$_____

Food already available to me:

Meals provided by a program / work / family:

Money I want to keep for later in the week: \$_____

Breakfasts I can repeat:

Lunches I can repeat:

Dinners I can repeat:

A USEFUL QUESTION

Before buying something, ask: “Will this become one meal, or can I use it more than once?”

Neither answer is always right - it simply helps you decide.

You do not always need a recipe.

Use this simple formula when you are tired, short on time, or working with what is available.

1

BASE

- Rice
- Pasta
- Potato
- Oats
- Tortilla
- Bread

2

PROTEIN

- Beans
- Lentils
- Chickpeas
- Peanut butter
- Peas
- Tofu

3

PRODUCE

- Frozen veg
- Canned veg
- Fresh veg
- Fruit

4

FLAVOR

- Salsa
- Hot sauce
- Garlic
- Soy sauce
- Spices
- Tomato sauce

EXAMPLE

Rice + beans + frozen corn + salsa = a meal. Potato + chickpeas + broccoli + hot sauce = a meal. Start with what you have.

Build three meals from foods you like

Use the formula from the previous page.

Repeating ingredients is a money-saving feature, not a failure.

MEAL 1

BASE

PROTEIN

PRODUCE

FLAVOR

Could I use any of these ingredients in another meal?

MEAL 2

BASE

PROTEIN

PRODUCE

FLAVOR

Could I use any of these ingredients in another meal?

MEAL 3

BASE

PROTEIN

PRODUCE

FLAVOR

Could I use any of these ingredients in another meal?

What equipment do you have?

Start with your equipment, then choose meals that fit it.

NO COOKING EQUIPMENT

Sandwiches, wraps, canned beans, fruit, shelf-stable foods.
Choose items that are safe to eat as sold.

MICROWAVE

Potatoes, oats, microwave rice, canned beans, frozen vegetables,
simple bowls.

MICROWAVE + FRIDGE

Add leftovers, cold sandwiches, overnight oats, cut fruit, chilled
bean salads.

HOT PLATE

Add pasta, lentils, rice, soups, skillet meals, and one-pot meals.

FULL KITCHEN

Use every section of this guide and build meals around your
budget and time.

Five microwave meal ideas

Use microwave-safe containers and follow package directions for packaged foods.

LOADED POTATO

Microwave a potato until tender. Split it and add beans, vegetables, salsa, or another topping you like.

RICE + BEANS BOWL

Combine microwave-ready rice, drained canned beans, and vegetables. Heat and add sauce or seasoning.

PEANUT BUTTER OATS

Cook oats according to package directions. Stir in peanut butter and add banana or another fruit.

QUICK BURRITO

Fill a tortilla with beans, rice, vegetables, and salsa. Heat if desired.

VEGGIE PASTA BOWL

Use a microwaveable pasta product or safely pre-cooked pasta, then add sauce, beans, and vegetables.

Five no-cook meal ideas

Useful when you do not have reliable access to cooking equipment.

PEANUT BUTTER + BANANA SANDWICH

Bread or tortilla + peanut butter + sliced banana.

BEAN + CORN WRAP

Drained canned beans + canned corn + tortilla + salsa.

CHICKPEA MASH SANDWICH

Mash drained chickpeas with a little condiment or seasoning, then add to bread.

OATS + FRUIT

Use oats prepared according to the product instructions for no-cook or overnight use when refrigeration is available.

FULL KITCHEN

Use every section of this guide and build meals around your budget and time.

Breakfast meals

Simple ingredients. Flexible swaps. No fancy equipment required.

Peanut Butter Banana Oats



MICROWAVE OR STOVE

YOU NEED

- oats
- water or plant milk
- peanut butter
- banana

DO THIS

Cook oats according to package directions using water or plant milk.

Stir in peanut butter and banana.

OPTIONALLY:

Sweeten with canned fruit or raisins.

Cinnamon Apple Oats



MICROWAVE OR STOVE

YOU NEED

- oats
- apple
- cinnamon
- water or plant milk

DO THIS

Cook oats.

Add chopped apple and cinnamon.

OPTIONALLY:

Sweeten with canned fruit or raisins.

MAKE IT CHEAPER

Use store brands, foods already available to you, and substitutions that prevent an extra trip to the store.

Rice meals

Simple ingredients. Flexible swaps. No fancy equipment required.

Beans + Rice Bowl ●

MICROWAVE OR STOVE

YOU NEED

- rice
- beans
- frozen or canned vegetables
- salsa or seasoning

DO THIS

Heat or cook the rice.
Add beans and vegetables.
Season to.

OPTIONALLY:

Use potatoes or tortillas instead of rice.

Quick Veggie Rice Bowl ●

MICROWAVE OR STOVE

YOU NEED

- rice
- mixed vegetables
- peas or beans
- soy sauce or seasoning

DO THIS

Heat rice and vegetables.
Add peas or beans.
Season and stir.

OPTIONALLY:

Use potatoes or tortillas instead of rice.

MAKE IT CHEAPER

Use store brands, foods already available to you, and substitutions that prevent an extra trip to the store.

Pasta meals

Simple ingredients. Flexible swaps. No fancy equipment required.

Tomato Lentil Pasta ●

STOVE

YOU NEED

- pasta
- cooked or canned lentils • tomato sauce
- optional vegetables

DO THIS

Cook pasta.
Warm sauce and lentils.
Combine and add vegetables.

OPTIONALLY:

Swap lentils for chickpeas.

Quick Veggie Rice Bowl ●

STOVE

YOU NEED

- pasta
- beans
- vegetables
- tomato sauce or seasoning

DO THIS

Cook pasta.
Drain beans.
Combine with sauce and vegetables .

OPTIONALLY:

Skip sauce and season with oil/spices.

MAKE IT CHEAPER

Use store brands, foods already available to you, and substitutions that prevent an extra trip to the store.

Potato meals

Simple ingredients. Flexible swaps. No fancy equipment required.

Loaded Bean Potato ●

MICROWAVE OR OVEN

YOU NEED

- potato
- beans
- vegetables
- salsa or sauce

DO THIS

Cook potato until tender.
Split it open.
Top with beans and vegetables.

OPTIONALLY:

Swap beans for lentils or peas.

Potato Vegetable Hash ●

STOVE

YOU NEED

- potatoes
- vegetables
- beans or lentils
- seasoning

DO THIS

Cut potatoes small.
Cook until tender and browned.
Add vegetables.

OPTIONALLY:

Use leftover potatoes to make this faster.

MAKE IT CHEAPER

Use store brands, foods already available to you, and substitutions that prevent an extra trip to the store.

Tortilla meals

Simple ingredients. Flexible swaps. No fancy equipment required.

Bean + Rice Burrito



NO-COOK OR MICROWAVE

YOU NEED

- tortilla
- rice
- beans
- salsa

DO THIS

Add ingredients to tortilla.
Fold tightly.
Heat if desired.

OPTIONALLY:

Add vegetables or leftover potatoes.

Peanut Butter Banana Roll Up



NO COOK

YOU NEED

- tortilla
- peanut butter
- banana

DO THIS

Spread peanut butter on tortilla.
Add banana.
Roll it up.

OPTIONALLY:

Use sliced apple or other fruit.

MAKE IT CHEAPER

Use store brands, foods already available to you, and substitutions that prevent an extra trip to the store.

No-Kitchen Meals

Simple ingredients. Flexible swaps. No fancy equipment required.

Chickpea Sandwich ●

NO-COOK

YOU NEED

- canned chickpeas
- bread
- condiment or seasoning
- optional vegetables

DO THIS

Drain chickpeas.
Mash with condiment or seasoning.
Add to bread.

OPTIONALLY:

Use white beans instead.

Bean + Corn Wrap ●

NO COOK

YOU NEED

- tortilla
- canned beans
- canned corn
- salsa or seasoning

DO THIS

Drain beans and corn.
Mix together.
Add to tortilla and roll.

OPTIONALLY:

Use rice if you have it.

MAKE IT CHEAPER

Use store brands, foods already available to you, and substitutions that prevent an extra trip to the store.

Food storage basics

Protect your food and your money by storing items safely and using them before they are wasted.

PANTRY

Keep dry foods sealed, dry, and away from pests. Label opened packages if that helps you remember what you have.

REFRIGERATOR

Keep foods that require refrigeration cold. Put leftovers away promptly and follow package storage instructions.

FREEZER

Freeze portions you will not use soon when the food can be safely frozen. Label the container with what it is and the date.

WHEN IN DOUBT

If food smells, looks, or has been stored in a way that makes you question its safety, use reliable food-safety guidance rather than guessing. Visit [FoodSafety.gov](https://www.foodsafety.gov) or your local health department for current guidance.

Foods I need to use first this week:

Cook once. Eat differently.

Repeating ingredients can save money without eating the exact same meal every day.

ONE POT OF BEANS + ONE BATCH OF RICE

MONDAY

Rice + beans bowl

WEDNESDAY

Loaded potato with beans

TUESDAY

Bean + rice burrito

THURSDAY

Beans added to pasta or soup

BEFORE YOU COOK

Ask yourself: “Could I make extra of the base ingredient and use it in another meal?” Only make extra when you can store it safely.

One ingredient I can use in 3 meals this week:

Feeding a family on a budget

Choose meals that scale easily and let people customize toppings or sides.

CHILI OR BEAN STEW

Beans + tomatoes +
vegetables + seasoning

PASTA NIGHT

Pasta + sauce + lentils or
beans + vegetables

RICE BOWLS

Rice + beans + vegetables
+ toppings

TACO / BURRITO NIGHT

Tortillas + beans + rice +
vegetables + salsa

BAKED POTATO BAR

Potatoes + beans +
vegetables + toppings

SOUP + BREAD

Lentils or beans + vegetables
+ broth + bread

KEEP THE BASE SIMPLE

A low-cost meal can still feel different when people choose their own sauce, seasoning, vegetables, or toppings.

Family meal planner

Planning does not mean every meal has to be different.

DAY	BREAKFAST	LUNCH	DINNER
Mon			
Tue			
Wed			
Thu			
Fri			
Sat			
Sun			

Food I can use in more than one meal:

Feeding a family on a budget

Choose meals that scale easily and let people customize toppings or sides.

SNAP

Food benefits for eligible households. Rules and eligibility can change, so use the official Florida application and information sources.

FOOD PANTRIES

Local organizations may provide groceries at no cost. Hours and requirements vary.

FOOD BANKS

Regional food banks support local pantry networks and can help you find nearby food.

COMMUNITY MEALS

Some churches, nonprofits, shelters, and community groups offer prepared meals.

PRODUCE PROGRAMS

Some markets and programs help eligible shoppers stretch benefits on fruits and vegetables.

REENTRY PROGRAMS

Ask your caseworker or transitional housing program what food support is already available.

My food resource plan

Write down information you can actually use when you need it.

My nearest grocery store or market:

My nearest food pantry:

My regional food bank:

Where I can ask about SNAP / benefits:

Meals or food provided by my program / housing:

Someone who can help me get there:

Week 1: get stable

The first week is about knowing where food is coming from and making a few basic meals.

- ☐ Figure out where I can get food this week.
- ☐ Buy a few flexible staples.
- ☐ Find out whether I qualify for or can access food assistance.
- ☐ Learn 3 simple meals I can make with my equipment.
- ☐ Keep at least one easy breakfast or snack available.
- ☐ Write down what I actually spent on food.

Three meals I can make right now:

One thing I need help with:

Weeks 2-4: build independence

Once the basics are handled, improve one skill at a time.

- ☐ Make a grocery list before shopping.
- ☐ Track what I spend for one full week.
- ☐ Learn 5 meals I can make without a recipe.
- ☐ Use leftovers or repeat ingredients before food goes to waste.
- ☐ Build a small pantry of foods I actually use.
- ☐ Find 2 low-cost meals I genuinely enjoy.
- ☐ Identify my most reliable food resource if money runs short.
- ☐ Try one new plant-based food or meal if I want to.

My 30-day food plan

Write down a few meals you can repeat.
This becomes your personal starting menu.

3 BREAKFASTS

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

3 LUNCHES

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

5 DINNERS

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

My weekly food budget goal: \$_____

My backup food resource: _____

MAKE IT YOURS

Foods I actually like

I LIKE

Write foods you already enjoy.

I WILL TRY

Foods you are curious about.

NOT FOR ME

Foods you do not need to buy.

KEEP THE BASE SIMPLE

Do not buy a food just because someone says it is healthy or cheap. Build your plan around foods that are affordable, available, and realistic for you.

What I know now

Check the skills that feel easier than they did before.

- ☐ Plan a basic grocery trip.
- ☐ Build a meal from a base + protein + produce + flavor.
- ☐ Identify a few low-cost protein options.
- ☐ Make meals with the equipment available to me.
- ☐ Use one ingredient in multiple meals.
- ☐ Plan a few days of food before shopping.
- ☐ Find food assistance if I need it.
- ☐ Write down a realistic weekly food budget.

The first thing I am going to do is:

One food skill I want to learn next:

YOUR FRESH START DOES NOT HAVE TO BE PERFECT.

Keep learning. Keep adjusting. Use the resources that help you feed yourself
and the people you care about.

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Food prices, programs, eligibility, facility rules, and local resources may change.



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