

# Trying to spend less on food? Following the dietary guidelines might save you \$160 a fortnight

November 27 2023, by Emily Burch and Lauren Ball

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## SERVE SIZES



### Vegetables and legumes/beans

	Serves per day		
	19-50 years	51-70 years	70+ years
Men	8	5½	5
Women	5	5	5



### Fruit

	Serves per day		
	19-50 years	51-70 years	70+ years
Men	2	2	2
Women	2	2	2



### Grain (cereal) foods, mostly wholegrain and/or high cereal fibre varieties

	Serves per day		
	19-50 years	51-70 years	70+ years
Men	6	6	4½
Women	8	4	3



### Lean meat and poultry, fish, eggs, tofu, nuts and seeds, and legumes/beans

	Serves per day		
	19-50 years	51-70 years	70+ years
Men	3	2½	2½
Women	2½	2	2



### Milk, yoghurt, cheese and/or alternatives, mostly reduced fat

	Serves per day		
	19-50 years	51-70 years	70+ years
Men	2½	2½	3½
Women	2½	4	4

Australia's Guide to Healthy Eating outlines the number of serves we need each day to stay healthy. Credit: eatforhealth.gov.au.

A rise in the [cost of living](#) has led many households to look for ways to save money.

New research suggests maintaining a [healthy diet](#), in line with the [Australian Dietary Guidelines](#), is cheaper than an unhealthy diet and [could save A\\$160](#) off a family of four's fortnightly shopping bill.

Poor diet is the most common preventable risk factor contributing to chronic disease in [Australia](#). So improving your diet can also be an important way to reduce the chance of developing chronic disease.

## **First, what are the dietary guidelines?**

The guidelines provide information on the quantity and types of foods most Australians should consume to promote overall health and well-being.

Recommendations include eating a wide variety of nutritious foods from the main five food groups:

- vegetables and legumes
- fruit
- grains
- lean meats and [meat alternatives](#) such as tofu, nuts and legumes
- dairy products.

The guidelines recommend limiting our intake of foods high in saturated fat, added salt, added sugars and alcohol.

## **What are Australians eating?**

Fewer than [7%](#) of Australians eat sufficient vegetables, in line with the

Australian Dietary Guidelines. In fact, Australians have an average healthy diet score of [55 out of 100](#)—barely passing.

Foods that aren't part of a food group are known as "discretionary" items, which includes alcohol, cakes, biscuits, chocolate and confectionery and most takeaway foods. Because they're typically high in kilojoules, saturated fat, sodium and added sugars, the Australian Dietary Guidelines recommend they only be eaten occasionally and in small amounts (ideally zero serves).

For many households, discretionary items make up a big portion of their grocery shop. Australians consume an average of [28 serves](#) of discretionary choices per week (equal to 28 doughnuts, 28 slices of cake, or 28 cans of soft drink or beer). This is an increase of ten serves since 2015.

One recent [study](#) estimated 55% of Australians' total energy intake was from discretionary items.

## **What did the researchers find?**

Researchers from the Health Promotion Team at South West Healthcare [recently](#) visited four local supermarkets and takeaway stores in Warrnambool, Victoria, and purchased two baskets of groceries.

One basket met the Australian Dietary Guidelines (basket one), the other aligned with the typical dietary intake of Australians (basket two).

## What is a serve of discretionary choices?

A serve of Discretionary choices provides about 500-600 kilojoule:

2 scoops (75g)	ice-cream
2 slices (50-60g)	processed meats, salami or mettwurst
1½ thick or 2 thin (50-70g)	regular sausages
½ snack-size packet (30g)	salty crackers or crisps
2-3 (35g)	sweet plain biscuits
1 (40g)	doughnut
1 slice (40g)	plain cake/small cake-type muffin
5-6 (40g)	sugar confectionary/small lollies
1 tblsp (60g)	jam or honey
½ bar (25g)	chocolate
2 tblsp (40g)	cream
1 tblsp (20g)	butter
1 can (375ml)	soft drink (sugar-sweetened)
¼ pie or pastie (60g)	commercial meat pie or pastie (individual size)
12 (60g)	fried hot chips
200ml	wine (2 standard drinks; but note this is often 1 glass for many Australian wines)
60ml	spirits (2 standard drinks)
600ml	light beer (1½ standard drinks)
400ml	standard beer (1½ standard drinks)



Australian Dietary Guidelines outline what a serve of a discretionary choice looks like. Credit: eatforhealth.gov.au.

They compared prices between the two and found basket one would cost approximately \$167 less per fortnight for a family of four at the most affordable supermarket. That's equal to \$4,342 a year.

Basket one was sufficient to supply a family of four for a fortnight, and aligned with the Australian Dietary Guidelines. It cost \$724 and included:

1. fruit and vegetables (made up 31% of the fortnightly shop)
2. grains and cereals (oats, cornflakes, bread, rice, pasta, Weet-bix)
3. lean meats and alternatives (mince, steak, chicken, tuna, eggs, nuts)
4. milk, yogurt and cheese
5. oils and spreads (olive oil).

Basket two reflected the current average Australian fortnightly shop for a family of four.

In the project, the team spent over half of the fortnightly shop on processed and packaged foods, of which 21% was spent on take-away. This is based on actual dietary intake of the general population reported in the 2011-2012 [Australian Health Survey](#).

Basket two cost \$891 and included:

1. fruit and vegetables (made up 13% of the fortnightly shop)

2. grains and cereals (oats, cornflakes, bread, rice, pasta, Weet-bix)
3. lean meats and alternatives (mince, steak, chicken, tuna, eggs, nuts)
4. milk, yogurt and cheese
5. oils and spreads (olive oil, butter)
6. drinks (soft drink, [fruit juice](#))
7. desserts and snacks (muffins, sweet biscuits, chocolate, [ice cream](#), [potato chips](#), muesli bars)
8. processed meats (sausages, ham)
9. convenience meals
10. fast food (pizza, meat pie, hamburger, fish and chips)
11. alcohol (beer, wine).

## **But a healthy basket is still unaffordable for many**

While this piece of work, and other [research](#), suggests a healthy diet is less expensive than an unhealthy diet, affordability is still a challenge for many families.

The Warrnambool research found basket one (which aligned with guidelines) was still costly, requiring approximately 25% of a median household income.

This is unaffordable for many. For a household reliant on welfare, basket one would require allocating 26%-38% of their income. This highlights how the rising cost of living crisis is affecting those already facing financial difficulties.

Around 3.7 [million](#) Australian households did not have access to enough food to meet their basic needs at some point in the last 12 months.

Policy action is needed from the Australian government to make recommended diets more affordable for low socioeconomic groups. This

means lowering the costs of healthy foods and ensuring household incomes are sufficient.

## What else can you do to cut your spending?

To help reduce food costs and support your health, reducing discretionary foods could be a good idea.

Other ways to reduce your grocery bill and keep your [food](#) healthy and fresh include:

- planning for some meatless meals each week. Pulses (beans, lentils and legumes) are nutritious and cheap (a can is [less than \\$1.50](#). Here are some great pulse recipes to [try](#)
- checking the specials and buy in bulk (to store or freeze) when items are cheaper
- making big batches of meals and freezing them. Single-serve portions can help save time for lunches at work, saving on takeaway
- Australian supermarkets are [almost never](#) the cheapest place for fresh produce, so shop around for farmers markets or smaller local grocery shops
- buying generic brands when possible, as they are [notably cheaper](#). Supermarkets usually promote the items they want you to buy at eye-level, so check the shelves above and below for cheaper alternatives.

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