

What Can I Make With What I Have?

A cupboard-to-meal decision guide

Sometimes the problem is not an empty kitchen. It is that the items do not automatically turn themselves into a meal. Looking at a cupboard, fridge or freezer can create more choices, more uncertainty and more pressure. This guide gives you a starting point that does not depend on inspiration.

Begin with one item you can see and tolerate. The meal can grow from there - or that one item may be enough for today.

The one-anchor method

Step	Question	Action
1. Pick	Which item feels easiest, most familiar or most urgent to use?	Take out one item only. This is the anchor, not a promise to make a complete recipe.
2. Check	Is it in date, stored correctly, intact and safe for me?	Read the label for allergens, storage, opening, cooking and use-by information. If uncertain, do not use it.
3. Name	What role could it play?	Call it a base, satisfying/protein component, produce/fibre component, flavour/moisture, snack or complete meal.
4. Match	Does it need anything else to become edible or acceptable?	Add only what solves a real need: heat, moisture, a safe texture, something filling or a familiar side.
5. Choose	What is the lowest-demand route?	Eat as it is; assemble; microwave; heat in one pan; use one tray; or ask someone else.
6. Stop	When is it enough?	Stop when you have something you can eat safely. You do not need to use every category or ingredient.

Name the anchor

If the item is...	It might be the...	Possible next question
Bread, potato, rice, pasta, noodles, cereal or tolerated alternative	Base	Is there one ready topping, filling or side?
Eggs, beans, pulses, fish, cooked meat, cheese/alternative, yoghurt/alternative or another safe option	Satisfying component	What familiar base or ready side is available?
Soup, frozen/tinned/pre-cut vegetables, fruit or another tolerated item	Produce / moisture	Would this work alone, with a base, or beside a safe food?
Sauce, stock, oil/fat, spread, herbs, seasoning or dip	Flavour / moisture	Which plain familiar item could this make easier to eat?
Ready meal, filled product, complete soup, sandwich or assembled dish	Meal already	Could I heat/open it exactly as directed and stop there?
Crackers, cereal bar, snack item or single safe food	Valid food	Can I eat this now and decide about anything else later?

Three decisions only

1. Safety	2. Acceptability	3. Capacity
Can I confirm it is safe, stored correctly and appropriate for my allergies/needs?	Can I tolerate the taste, smell, texture, temperature and food contact today?	Can I prepare it and manage the heat, timing and clean-up safely?

If any answer is no

Choose another item, reduce the method, use a ready-made or no-cook option, keep components separate, or ask for support. Do not use hunger or urgency to pressure yourself into an unsafe ingredient or intolerable sensory experience.

My thoughts

"There is food in the house" is not the same as "there is food I can identify, prepare and eat." The missing bridge may be executive function, sensory safety, equipment, time or physical capacity. Naming that bridge replaces blame with useful information.

Turn one item into a meal route

Mix, match, substitute or stop with the anchor

The examples below are prompts, not instructions to combine foods that are unsafe or unwanted. Check every label, use personally safe alternatives and keep items separate when that protects appetite or texture.

Cupboard anchors

If you find...	Lowest-demand possibilities	If one addition is manageable
Tinned soup	Heat exactly as directed; eat alone.	Add a ready bread/cracker alternative, microwave base or safe topping.
Beans or pulses	Drain/rinse or heat as the label states; eat with a familiar base.	Add a safe sauce, seasoning, ready grain or tolerated vegetable.
Tinned fish/meat	Check whether it is ready to eat; place beside crackers, bread or microwave rice.	Add safe dressing/spread or a ready vegetable.
Rice/grain pouch	Heat as directed and eat plain or with a familiar condiment.	Add a ready-cooked satisfying component or tinned item.
Pasta/noodles	Follow packet method; add oil/fat, safe sauce or tolerated topping.	Add a ready-cooked or tinned component.
Cereal/oats	Use at any time of day with a safe liquid/alternative, or eat dry if appropriate.	Add a tolerated topping or serve beside another familiar item.
Crackers/crispbread	Eat as they are or add a familiar spread/topping.	Serve with soup, dip, cheese/alternative or cooked protein.

Fridge anchors

If you find...	Meal route
Leftover portion	Use only if cooled, stored and dated safely. Reheat according to current guidance, or discard if uncertain.
Eggs	Use a familiar trusted method; pair with a ready base. Never guess about safety or microwave an egg in its shell.
Cheese / alternative / spread	Add to bread, crackers, potato or pasta; keep cold/hot and separate if preferred.
Yoghurt / alternative	Eat alone, with cereal or tolerated fruit, or beside a dry safe food.
Cooked protein	Check storage and use-by information; serve cold if ready to eat or reheat only as directed.
Pre-cut produce	Use as a side, add to a bowl, or leave out when sensory capacity is low.

Freezer anchors

If you find...	Use it without adding decisions
Complete frozen meal	Follow the exact appliance, wattage/temperature, stirring/turning and standing instructions.
Frozen potato/base	Cook one portion as directed; add one ready topping or side only if wanted.
Frozen vegetables	Use the stated microwave/pan/oven method; serve separately to protect texture.
Prepared protein item	Follow its exact cooking directions. Pair only with a base that does not complicate timing.
Frozen bread/alternative	Defrost/toast only according to its instructions; add a familiar topping.

Substitution without turning it into a different meal

Missing	Ask	Possible response
The exact base	Do I need the same shape, texture or function?	Use another safe base, serve the topping alone, or choose a different anchor.
Fresh ingredient	Is frozen, tinned, dried or ready-prepared acceptable?	Use the form that is safe and available; freshness is not a moral quality.
Sauce or flavour	Does the meal need moisture or only familiarity?	Use a safe spread, oil/fat, stock or nothing. Do not improvise around allergens.
Energy to cook	Can the ingredient become a no-cook or microwave meal?	Change the method, use a complete meal, or eat the safe component now.

The “close enough” rule

A meal does not have to resemble a recipe. A base plus topping, soup plus crackers, cereal at night, or several safe items placed side by side can be enough. The useful question is not “Does this count?” It is “Can I eat this safely with the capacity I have?”

My food-at-home finder

A visible map for days when the kitchen feels blank

Complete this when you have enough capacity, or ask someone to help. Record categories, not an idealised inventory. Cross items out when unavailable and review dates regularly.

What I usually have

Place	Safe anchors	Easy additions	Needs using first
Cupboard	_____	_____	_____
Fridge	_____	_____	_____
Freezer	_____	_____	_____

My anchor-to-meal worksheet

One item I can start with: _____

Is it safe, in date, intact and stored correctly? _____

Its role: ☐ base ☐ satisfying component ☐ produce/moisture ☐ flavour ☐ complete meal ☐ safe food

What does it actually need? ☐ nothing ☐ opening ☐ heating ☐ moisture ☐ one side ☐ help

Lowest-demand route: ☐ eat now ☐ assemble ☐ microwave ☐ one pan ☐ one tray ☐ ask someone

Texture / smell / temperature to protect: _____

My back-up if capacity changes: _____

A five-minute “use first” check

Check	Action
Use-by dates	Follow use-by dates for safety. Do not eat after a use-by date.
Best-before dates	These concern quality rather than safety for many foods, but follow official guidance and the product condition.
Opened items	Write the opening date when needed and follow “use within” instructions.
Leftovers	Label contents/date, cool and store safely, and follow current reheating guidance. If history is unknown, do not guess.
Damaged packaging	Do not use bulging, leaking, badly dented, broken-seal or otherwise unsafe-looking packs; follow disposal guidance.

When no combination appears

What may be happening	Response
Too many items are visible	Close the cupboard. Choose from three photographed anchors or a written safe-food list.
Everything needs preparation	Use a complete ready meal, no-cook safe food, delivery/support if available, or plan to restock.
Nothing feels edible	Reduce smell/visual load, choose the most predictable item, use a drink or personally appropriate supplement if advised, and seek support when this persists.
You cannot tell what is safe	Do not guess. Check labels/storage history or discard. Ask another person to help assess and restock.
Shame says it is not a “meal”	Name the purpose: being fed. A collection of safe components can meet that purpose.

Safety, sources and books

Food Standards Agency: [food.gov.uk/safety-hygiene](https://www.food.gov.uk/safety-hygiene) - food storage, date labels, allergens, cooking and leftovers.

NHS Eatwell Guide: [nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/](https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/) - general information on variety and balance across time.

Love Food Hate Waste: lovefoodhatewaste.com - storage, planning and using food guidance; check safety information against current FSA advice.

Books: *Cook As You Are* by Ruby Tandoh; *The Autism-Friendly Cookbook* by Lydia Wilkins; *How to Keep House While Drowning* by KC Davis.

Clinical note

This educational guide cannot determine whether an individual food is safe or nutritionally suitable. Check labels every time and do not substitute around an allergen. Seek qualified support for severe restriction, changing weight or hydration, physical reactions, swallowing difficulty, medical diets or increasing food distress.

A message from Maggie

You do not need a recipe idea before you are allowed to eat. Start with what feels visible, safe and possible. One item can become a meal, part of a meal or simply the food that gets you through this moment. Resourcefulness is not making something impressive from scraps; sometimes it is recognising that opening the easiest thing is the right decision.

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