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Eight Cheap Ways to Refresh Your Kitchen Without a Full Remodel

by Holly Johnson

If you've been dreaming of a new kitchen but can't stomach the thought of a pricey remodel, you're right to worry. A 2016 analysis from [Remodeling Magazine](#) pegs the average cost of a full kitchen overhaul at about \$60,000, after all. And while Angie's List users have reported spending a more modest \$20,000 to \$25,000 on average, [some sources](#) say a high-end remodel can surge up to \$80,000 or more.

With estimates like those flying around, it's easy to just try to ignore your outdated kitchen and make do with what you have. It could take years or even decades to save up the cash to do a full kitchen remodel. You could [borrow the money with a HELOC](#) or a low-interest credit card, but then you'd pay interest on your kitchen remodel, too.

But, what if there was a better way? What if you could *kinda-maybe-sorta* remodel your kitchen with some simple, yet effective fixes that make a big difference in the look and utility of your home's most important room?

Eight Ways to Redo an Outdated Kitchen Without Spending a Lot

If you're desperately wishing for a better kitchen but don't want to spend tens of thousands of dollars, don't despair. If you look hard enough, there are dozens of small and inexpensive upgrades that can make your kitchen brighter, more organized, and better overall.

But, which cheap fixes can make the biggest impact? We spoke to an array of real estate experts and home designers to find out. Here's what they said:

#1: Update (don't replace) your kitchen cabinets.

While the focus of any kitchen remodeling project usually involves installing brand new kitchen cabinets, you don't have to fork over tens of thousands of dollars for new cabinets if your current set is in good shape.

If they're solid wood especially, a few simple upgrades can make your kitchen cabinets look a lot better – and more up-to-date than they do now.

According to real estate expert and founder of [RemodelingCosts.org](#) Alex Biyevetskiy, simple (and cost-effective) cabinet upgrades to consider include:

- **Cabinet pulls:** “Any kitchen cabinets can be updated by replacing the hinges, knobs, and pulls with contemporary hardware,” says Biyevetskiy.
- **Sanding and re-staining:** “Wood cabinets that are sanded and re-stained to get rid of oily stains, scratches, and a color that doesn't fit your design scheme become vibrant components of your low-cost, high-appeal kitchen,” he adds.
- **A new paint job:** If stained natural wood isn't the look you prefer, then sand the cabinets and paint them in a color that appeals to you. While a lot of people choose fancy color schemes for the cabinets, bright white kitchen cabinets can create a clean and updated look in any kitchen.

#2: Shop for budget countertops.

While most full kitchen remodels inevitably require new upscale countertops, you can easily save on this expense simply by shopping around. If you're keeping your old cabinets and simply refreshing them, it may even be the perfect time to rip out and replace the countertops you have.

Nancy Brook, a [realtor from Billings, Mont.](#) suggests shopping for new stone countertops at discount granite shops or home improvement stores instead of with a designer. Brook says she has personally bought brand new granite countertops for less than half the price of what she would have paid elsewhere just by shopping at Lowe's during one of their big annual sales.

“Also consider other options like resin, which can be put atop an existing laminate counter, or concrete,” says Brook.

Brian Davis of [SparkRental.com](#) also suggests replacing or covering existing counters with wooden butcher's block. “They're much cheaper, and will age gracefully if cared for,” says Davis. “Round out the look with a matching wooden dish rack and wine rack. Add a bottle of two of stuffy-looking French wine and it's a whole new look.”

The right countertops for your specific kitchen depend on your existing cabinetry, style, and budget, but you can save a bundle by keeping your mind open to different materials, comparing prices, and setting up the installation yourself. Meanwhile, you may also save additional funds if you're willing to remove your old countertops yourself versus paying an installer to do the demo work.

#3: Add roll-out kitchen shelves.

If you skip the new kitchen cabinets but still want the feel and improved functionality of a new kitchen, adding some newer upgrades to your existing cabinets can offer a big bang for your buck. Darla DeMorrow of Heartwork Organizing is big on [adding roll-out shelving to kitchens](#) that need better organization and more room.

Roll-out shelving units are typically around \$100 each, says DeMorrow, but they give you back precious square feet of otherwise lost kitchen cabinet space. They can also make existing cabinets more usable for people with mobility issues, says DeMorrow.

#4: Play around with lighting.

Lights and light switches play a big role in how bright and welcome a kitchen feels. That's why, as a general rule, warm lighting is better in kitchens, notes Davis.

"Avoid overly dim lighting in favor of a brighter, warmer, more welcoming feel," he says. "Also consider swapping out the light switch panels, which should match the hardware and overall feel of the kitchen well."

Shopping around for new light fixtures and light switches is easy at most home improvement stores, and you can even compare prices online.

Home designer Christina O'Leary suggests finding an expensive lighting fixture you love in a magazine, then looking for a cheaper lookalike (or full lighting set) in a big box store.

"I've staged million-dollar house dining rooms using lights from Lowe's," says O'Leary. "No one ever suspected it was something other than top of the line."

#5: Jazz things up with new paint and new curtains.

Iris Wingfield, an interior design consultant in the United Kingdom, says never to underestimate the effect of a new coat of paint and new curtains to match.

"Changing the colors will always feel like a huge change — and it is," says Wingfield. "It will be a refreshing new look for the room and the only thing needed is paint."

Not only does painting offer a cost-effective way to make a huge, sweeping change to your room, but you can probably do the labor yourself, too. Doing the bulk of the grunt work for your paint job can save you even more money.

Curtains can also make a surprisingly big difference, says Wingfield. "It's necessary to change your kitchen curtains from time to time as they absorb all smells and smoke." Upgrading them and matching them to the new colors in the kitchen will make it feel like a new room, as will splurging for a few matching accent rugs, pictures, or décor.

#6: Upgrade to a fancy kitchen faucet.

Changing out an old, ugly kitchen faucet can give your kitchen a more updated look — and it can also improve your kitchen's functionality, since new faucets tend to have features that make cooking and cleaning easier.

For example, the increased height of newer faucets makes filling pots and washing big pots and pans a much simpler task, says kitchen designer Anna Gibson of [AKG Design Studio](#).

For an especially modern look, you can also consider changing out the finish to something trendy like brushed brass or black, or go with easy to clean stainless steel, says Gibson.



A new backsplash and butcher block counters can help refresh your kitchen on the cheap.

#7: Add a fancy backsplash.

Adding a tile backsplash is one of the most cost-effective ways to change the whole style of your kitchen, Gibson says. Not only will the change be dramatic, but it's fairly easy to swap out old tile for new – or add a backsplash where there wasn't one before.

“Chuck those outdated travertine tiles and choose colorful subway tile. You can even go with peel and stick tile backsplash for an easy install,” says Gibson.

As long as the material you're considering is dirt and water resistant, don't be afraid to use it. And if your budget for backsplash is super low or nonexistent, it's okay to think outside of the box.

“One of the affordable options is stencils and paint, as it can let you add dimension with minimal investment and lots of style,” says Gibson. Obviously, you'll need to have some artistic skill to pull off this look.

“Another option is wallpaper,” she adds. “It's back on the rise and works great as a backsplash.”

#8: Pay for new appliances, but go with the basic brands.

New appliances can definitely make your kitchen feel newer, but the added expense can send your kitchen remodeling budget into a tailspin in a hurry.

According to Brook, you can save a bundle by avoiding the fancy designer kitchen brands and going with whatever is available on sale at your local hardware store. If you're brave, you may even want to consider buying used appliances cast off during someone else's kitchen update.

"Appliance sales happen several times a year, usually during major holidays," says Brook. "Check out department and box stores to save up to 40% off retail. You can also shop classifieds on Facebook and Craigslist for used appliances."

The Bottom Line

Wishing for a new kitchen is one thing, but actually paying for one is an entirely different animal. While it might be worth the splurge to get your dream kitchen, there are plenty of simple upgrades you can make in lieu of a full-fledged remodeling job.

After all, spending \$50,000 or more for an upgraded kitchen could mean working in your career longer than you planned, taking fewer vacations, or having a smaller nest egg for retirement. If none of those trade-offs seem worth it for the privilege of a picture-perfect kitchen, then consider one or two of the more modest refreshers on this list.

Holly Johnson is an award-winning personal finance writer and the author of [Zero Down Your Debt](#). Johnson shares her obsession with frugality, budgeting, and travel at [ClubThrifty.com](#).