Healthy Eating on a Budget

Eating smart helps maintain good health. In tough economic times, however, you may be wondering, “How can I afford to eat healthy and still feed my family?” There are many cost-saving strategies that will help you eat wisely and stay within your food budget.

Before shopping – make a plan
- Take a few minutes to plan meals for the week. Make a list of both main and side dishes.
- Check store flyers each week and incorporate foods that are on sale into your menu.
- Make a shopping list based on your weekly menu. Stick to the list.
- Use food coupons only for food that is a good buy and that you will use. Organize your coupons before shopping. Make sure that the coupon price is cheaper than alternatives. Shop at stores offering double or triple coupon values. Stock up when you discover good deals. Combine coupons with sale items. Join a coupon swapping organization in your area, or start your own swap at your workplace or child’s school.

Get the best deal
- Download coupons online for frequently purchased items. There are several online sources. Check circulars from several stores. These are typically inserted into the Sunday or Wednesday newspaper or may be found at the front of the store. To get the best buys, shop at more than one store—but keep an eye on your gas bill.
- Look for coupons on food packaging, in grocery store aisles, on grocery receipts, in magazines, and on the Internet. Coupon Cart (www.couponCart.com) and Coolsavings (www.coolsavings.com) offer lots of coupons, although you must register to access them. Hot Coupons (www.Hotcoupons.com) and Valpak (www.valpak.com) offer coupons without registration.
- Use store loyalty cards to take advantage of special offers.

Practice money-saving strategies
- Shop once a week or less often. You will save money (and time) by avoiding temptation and impulse purchases.
- Use unit pricing to make sure you get the best buy. Bring a calculator to the store if necessary.
- Find the lowest-cost package size. Biggest is not always the better buy. Individual-size containers can be twice as expensive.
- Find the brand that costs less. Generic or store brands are often (but not always) lower in price.
- Compare prices for different product forms, such as fresh, frozen, and canned items, as well as the cost of individual pieces of prepackaged food like bagels, muffins, or rolls.
- Purchase what you need based on the cost per serving.
- Purchase fruits and vegetables that are in season. When fresh produce is too expensive, purchase canned or frozen fruits and vegetables. Buy canned and frozen fruits and vegetables with no added sugar or sauce.

Shop at the right time for the best deals:
- Shop for baked goods early in the day. The bakeries mark down yesterday’s items. Freeze part of the bread if you will not use it within the next few days.
- Shop for meat later in the day. The meat department marks down items about to go past the “sell by” date. Use the same day or freeze immediately.
- Don’t shop when you’re hungry or tired—you’re more likely to make impulse purchases.

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- Avoid the junk and snack food aisles. Items like chips, soda, and snack foods are expensive. Your food dollar is better spent on more nutritious options such as fruit, nuts, cheese, or whole-grain crackers.
- Compare prices of store and generic brands. If quality is similar, purchase the cheapest brand.
- Check the price of bagged produce such as apples, oranges, potatoes, or onions. They may be cheaper than buying single items. Make sure you plan your menu to use all that you buy.
- Purchase large portions of meats—whole chickens, large bags of chicken parts, and family packs. Divide into smaller containers and freeze.
- Replace some of the meat in your diet with alternative protein sources such as beans. When you do serve meat, serve smaller portions or make dishes such as stir-fry or casseroles that use less meat.

- Oatmeal makes a healthy and filling breakfast that is much less expensive than cold, ready-to-eat cereals. Make it with milk instead of water for added protein and calcium. Purchase plain oatmeal (quick cooking or old-fashioned) instead of single-serving, flavored oatmeal.
- Buy non-food items (medicine, cleaning, and hygiene products) at a discount store.

**Go Homegrown**

**Buy in-season and local fruits and vegetables:**
- Berries and greens in spring
- Apples and butternut squash in fall
- Melon and tomatoes in summer
- Sweet potatoes and broccoli in winter

- Shop regularly at local farmers’ markets and farm stands. To find North Carolina state-owned farmers’ markets and community farmers’ markets, visit www.ncfarmfresh.com/farmmarkets.asp.
- Join a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) group. Pay the farmer money in the winter, and in spring and summer get a weekly box of fresh, local produce. For more information, go to www.ncfarmfresh.com/farms.asp.
- Growing your own vegetables in the backyard or in large containers is a great way to keep fresh vegetables at your fingertips. High-yield plants such as tomatoes may be best for a first-time gardener.
- Consider joining a community garden to share the work with friends and neighbors. Check with your local Cooperative Extension office for more information about how you can grow your own food.

**Make Mine TO GO**

Pack and carry lunches, snacks, and beverages for work or school.
- Make your own single serving bags. Purchasing single servings of foods can be expensive. Make your own by buying the larger size and portioning the food out into bags or containers. You can save on yogurt, cottage cheese, pretzels, crackers, carrots, and other foods.
- Pack leftovers from the night before. Use a soft-sided cooler or lunch box with an ice pack to keep it safe.
- Keep a snack bag in your drawer at work or in your car. A stash of whole-wheat crackers, pretzels, low-fat granola bars, or other non-perishable foods will help keep you from hitting expensive vending machines and convenience stores.
- Drink water rather than other more costly beverages. Do not purchase bottled water. Instead, use refillable containers and tap water.

**Brown bag your lunch more often. At $5.00 for a typical fast food lunch, your savings will add up quickly.**
Focus on Beans

Using less expensive high-protein foods such as beans may be new to you, but with a little know-how and planning, you can save a lot of money. A half-cup serving of beans has plenty of protein (7 grams) and about a quarter of the fiber you need each day. Canned beans offer a quick alternative to dried beans. However, dried beans are considerably cheaper and not difficult to prepare once you get the hang of it.

Dried Bean Basics:
- Dry beans expand to about 2½ times their original size when soaked.
- One pound of dry beans equals about 2 cups dry, or 5 to 6 cups cooked.
- Dried beans should be stored in a cool, dry place, preferably in their plastic package.
- If you buy dried beans in bulk, store in an airtight bag or container.
- Dried beans can be stored for six months to one year.
- Rinse the beans and remove stones or shriveled and discolored beans before using.

Soaking Dried Beans:
- Overnight method: Put beans in a large pot and fill with enough cold tap water to cover them by three inches. Soak beans overnight, 8 to 12 hours. The next morning, drain the beans. You can keep the beans in the refrigerator until you're ready to use them.
- Quick soak method: For each pound of dried beans, bring 10 cups of water to a boil in a large pot. Add the beans, and then return to a boil for 2 to 3 minutes. Remove from heat and let stand with lid on pot for at least one hour but preferably more than four hours. The longer the beans soak, the quicker they will cook. Drain the beans before using.
- Some types of beans, including lentils, do not require soaking. Check package instructions if you’re not sure about the beans you’re using.

Cooking Dried Beans:
- Cooking beans with tomatoes, vinegar, or lemon juice (anything acidic) will increase the cooking time. Try adding such ingredients toward the end of the cooking time.
- Cook beans in water or low-sodium stock or broth.
- Cook the beans and add vegetables and flavorings for a one-pot soup or stew, or you can drain cooked beans and use in salads or other dishes.
- Cooking times:
  - Baby Lima Beans: 1 hour
  - Black-eyed Peas: ¾ to 1 hour
  - Dark Red Kidneys: 1 to 1½ hours
  - Garbanzos (chickpeas): 1 to 1½ hours
  - Large Limas: ¾ to 1 hour
  - Light Red Kidneys: 1 to 1½ hours
  - Pink Beans: 1 to 1 ½ hours
  - Small Whites: 1 to 1 ½ hours

Get the Best for Less

Eating well does not have to be expensive. For about the cost of a soft drink, you can eat a nutritious, quick, and delicious snack. The following snacks are about the same price as one soft drink from a vending machine and are healthy choices.

- One small apple and one ounce of cheese
- One small banana and one tablespoon peanut butter
- One carrot stick, or rib celery and two tablespoons low-fat Ranch dip
- ½ cup applesauce and two sheets graham crackers
- One medium orange
- Pudding cup
- Three cups popcorn and orange juice spritzer (½ cup juice with ½ cup club soda)
- One cup cereal and ½ cup low-fat milk
- ½ cup cucumber slices and four tablespoons salsa
Green leafy vegetables are nutrition superstars, chock full of vitamins and other important nutrients. Romaine, leaf lettuce, butterhead, and mesclun are delicious in salads. Enjoy spinach either raw or cooked. Other greens, such as kale, collards, Swiss chard, and bok choy, require cooking. These greens are inexpensive and delicious. You can prepare them quickly and healthfully by sautéing or braising.

- Choose deep-colored greens without yellow or black spots and without signs of wilting.
- Greens will cook down, so use plenty. In general, a pound and a half of raw greens will feed four people.
- Raw greens will keep in the refrigerator for one week and sometimes up to two, but the fresher the better.
- Cooked greens can be refrigerated for up to four days and then reheated.

Cooking

**Sautéed/Braised:**
- For each 1 to 1½ pounds of greens, heat one tablespoon of olive or vegetable oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat.
- Add stems, onions, and garlic, if using. Stir occasionally and cook several minutes until softened.
- Add the chopped leaves. Stir well and cook until the greens are all bright green.
- Add ¼ cup water or low-sodium broth, cover, and cook until tender. Check halfway through to make sure there is enough liquid to keep the greens from burning.

**Timing:**
- Kale: 12-15 minutes
- Collards: 7-10 minutes
- Bok choy: 4-6 minutes
- Swiss chard: 10-12 minutes
- Mustard: 2-3 minutes
- Finish by adding a few teaspoons of vinegar, lemon juice, soy sauce, or other seasonings.
- Greens like kale go great in soups! Add washed and chopped leaves to the soup and simmer for the last 15 to 20 minutes of cooking.

Preparation

- Cut away the leaves from the stems. For many greens, you can chop the stems and cook them first, then add leaves that have been chopped or cut into narrow strips.
- Wash the leaves and stems well. Drain or dry in a salad spinner.
- Add chopped onions and garlic for great flavor.