

Shopping, Cooking and Eating on a Budget

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There are two main good reasons for being on a food budget. Money available for food may be limited, or saving money for something else is the intention. Whatever the reason, the most important thing to keep in mind is that it is good to cut back on costs but NOT to cut back on nutrients. Food intake needs to include all the necessary nutrients our bodies require to be healthy: vitamins, minerals, protein, carbohydrates, fiber, good fats, and water – not too little of each, and not too much either. Eating nutritious foods does not have to be expensive and eating on a budget does not mean you have to stop eating or you have to eat less nutritious foods. By being careful and creative when food shopping, cooking, and eating, meals can be balanced, tasty, satisfying and fun to make too. Here are some suggestions to help you stay on a food budget.

Food Shopping

Plan ahead and make a list. Do you have some noodles or rice that have been in your kitchen cabinets for long? How about some canned foods? Anything you've been getting in the pantry food bags and have not used yet? Look in the refrigerator and freezer compartments, is there anything you can use to make a casserole or soup? Make a list of what you would like to eat for the next several days or week, using some or all of what you already have, and list those ingredients you need to buy. Check to see what space you have available for storage. Food that is not eaten spoils if not properly stored and that is a waste. Save some money by avoiding any wasted food.

****Buy only what is on your list** and in the amounts you will eat, avoid impulse buying. Be flexible enough so that if you see something you normally eat is on sale, you can change your list on the spot. For example, your list calls for buying broccoli to go with your pasta but they have zucchini or string beans on sale that day, switch the vegetables and get what is on sale instead.

****Know your prices** so you can compare products of similar contents and quality. Read the labels on the shelf and compare the prices per unit (lb, oz, etc.) You can only compare products priced in the same units. For instance, don't compare a product that has a unit price of "\$.80/oz" against one that has a unit price of "\$10.00/lb" unless you know how to make the conversion. Keep it simple, compare pounds with pounds and ounces with ounces.

****Buy fresh fruits and vegetables that are in season** and on specials. Compare prices with frozen fruits and vegetables. Fresh is best but frozen and canned are also nutritious too.

****Buy bulk** when appropriate. A chunk of cheese will cost less than a bag of the same cheese shredded. A small bag of apples or oranges usually cost less than buying them individually. A whole chicken costs less than pieces already cut up. You can cut it yourself and have several meals from it. Many dry goods are cheaper if purchased by weight and/or in larger quantities, like rice, oatmeal, beans, flours, etc.

****Buy store brand products**, generic brands. They usually are less expensive and are the same in contents as other well-known brands. The difference is in the price.

****Check food ads** in the papers, magazines and at the food stores. Save coupons and use them only for products you consume. Compare them to other brands for lower prices.

Many coupons are for more expensive brands so you end up spending more even when on sale. Shop on days when “double coupons” are offered, double the value of the coupons are discounted from the marked prices. Use food coupons/vouchers where accepted.

Cooking and Eating

****Convenience, pre-packaged or pre-cooked, processed foods tend to be more expensive. Prepare your own meals and you will not only have better tasting food and save some dollars but will also get less sodium, fat, sugars and artificial colors, flavorings and preservatives (read the ingredients list in processed foods), and will be fresher and more nutritious.**

****Cook larger quantities and save as another meal for the next day or to freeze for another time.** You will save time, fuel, and some ingredients when preparing food in double or triple batches. Bake a whole chicken or large piece of meat and make several meals to last you the whole week.

****Eat more vegetable proteins (beans, lentils, peas, tofu, peanut butter) - they are nutritious, cost less, and are cholesterol-free.**

****Less expensive cuts of meats are made tender and tasty by cooking them slowly, at low heat, for longer. You can also use a slow cooker, or a heavy pot with a lid and cook the meat on top of the stove or in the oven.**

****Leaner cuts of meats are more expensive but you can buy just a very small amount and prepare dishes that call for little meat like stir fries with vegetables and stews with potatoes and vegetables.**
****Add a bag of frozen vegetables to rice, noodles, any casserole or stew, or any meal.**

****Luncheon meats, cold cuts, are expensive and high in sodium, fat and preservatives. Make your own sandwich spreads with canned tuna, salmon, chicken, or cook some eggs and make a salad, or make a spread with canned chickpeas or other beans. Chopped celery, cucumbers or apples add a crunchy texture and nice flavor to the sandwich spreads.**

****Save leftovers and make them into another meal.** Eat leftovers within two to three days, or freeze and eat within a month or two. Make sure to label them with contents and date.

****Pita breads are good for leftovers. Toast it lightly, cut in half and make two sandwich pockets to stuff with any leftover food.**

****Use pita bread to make mini pizzas. Spread leftover tomato sauce and whatever topping you have, then heat in the oven for a couple of minutes. You can also use English Muffins or tortillas to make individual pizzas.**

****Cook extra pasta and save for next day. Make a pasta salad with leftover vegetables, chicken meat, chopped tomatoes and vinegar & oil or your favorite dressing.**

****Leftover stew, casserole or any dish can be made into a hearty soup the next day. Add broth, any cooking herbs, some chopped fresh vegetables or frozen vegetables, noodles or canned beans and some water if more liquid is needed.**

****Use leftover meats, chicken, vegetables, to make a stir-fry and serve over rice or noodles. Or use them to make a salad and stuff tomatoes, or peppers.**

****Make an omelet with leftovers.** Make rice pudding with leftover rice, or freeze it for later. Use extra fruit to add to salads, or cut up and sprinkle over cereal or yogurt.

****Experiment with new seasonings.** You may not like certain foods from one experience only. Try cooking them in a different way, with different seasonings and combining them with other foods. They may taste completely different, from flavor to texture to looks so don't give up. One example is tofu, a protein-rich food, cholesterol free, inexpensive and rich in phytonutrients. It is tasteless when eaten plain but it can be seasoned with different herbs and spices and can be sautéed, fried, BBQ, baked, mashed, and can turn into delicious ethnic dishes, even into desserts like cheesecake! The different seasonings can make it taste like oriental food, or like Spanish, Mexican, Italian, Middle Eastern or any other international dish. The trick is in the way it is prepared.

****Eat more oatmeal.** Get the plain oatmeal, quick or old fashioned. You can buy it by the pound at some healthfood stores, and it costs less than the packaged ones. But even the supermarket's own brand of oatmeal is a good buy. Oatmeal is very nutritious and energizing, a great way to start the day. Mix it with any of these ingredients: cut up fruits, raisins, milk, ricemilk or soymilk, yogurt, cinnamon, nuts, or a little brown sugar or honey.

****Avoid overeating or eating while watching TV.** Doing this only increases your food budget and can lead to obesity.

****Remember that if you eat out often, you must factor that into your budget.** Spending just \$3 a day on eating something out each day will add up to over \$1,000 a year. If you spend \$5 a day, the total per year would be over \$1,800. Eat at home before going out so you won't be hungry until you return, or think about taking some snacks with you from home. ****Remember that balancing your meals is very important.** Filling your plate with foods of different colors is one way to balance your meals easily: -red/orange/yellow (carrots, pumpkin, squash, sweet potato, orange, tomato) -dark greens (kale, collards, broccoli, spinach) -blue/purple/black (berries, eggplant, dark olives, black beans, dark grapes) -whites (milk, white beans, cauliflower, cheese, egg white -browns (teas and whole grains and legumes). These are just some examples. Make sure also to include the nutrients needed: carbohydrates (starchy foods like grains and dry beans), proteins (meats, fish, dairy products, soy, nuts, dry beans, poultry), good fats (found in fish, olive oil, nuts, avocado, canola oil, flax seeds) fiber (fruits, vegetables, whole grains & dry beans), vitamins & minerals (fruits and vegetables) and water.

The above are just some examples but there are many more foods to choose from to make your meals and snacks delicious and nutritious. Relax, try to always eat sitting at the table, and enjoy your food!