

Healthy Eating on a Budget

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Nutritious food doesn't have to cost more. With a little work, you can fill your plate and still have cash left in your wallet.

Are high food prices keeping you from improving your diet? Don't write off all those good foods! You can have a healthy diet on a reasonable budget. Here are some tips to stretch your dollar:

Buy in bulk

- Buy large portions, divide into individual servings and freeze. This works well for lean meats and poultry, some dairy products and breads.
- Shop at discount membership stores. They often have whole-grain cereals, soups, meats, fruits and vegetables at lower cost than regular markets.
- Visit stores that have bulk sections where you can buy rice, beans, oatmeal and other grains for much less than prepackaged products.
- Buy bags of fruit, when available, instead of individual pieces by the pound.

Cook and store in bulk

- Make dishes on the weekends that you can eat during the week, or freeze and use at a later date. A big pot of soup or chili can be dinner and lunch for the next day or two. This can save you from more expensive options, such as frozen dinners, take-out food, trips to the cafeteria or last-minute detours to the drive-through window.
- Create leftovers that can be used in new ways. Cook extra servings of vegetables tonight that can bulk up your favorite casserole tomorrow. An extra portion of meat can top a green salad later in the week.

Manage the meat

- Look for sales on lean meat, poultry and fish. You can plan meals around what's on sale and freeze extra portions for later.
- Trade lean meats for other protein sources. Beans, nuts and seeds, and eggs are excellent protein choices and good alternatives to pricier meat-based proteins.
- Stretch your meats. Stir-fries, casseroles and stews use many other ingredients so you can use less meat. And be sure to watch portion sizes.

Be season-savvy

- Buy seasonal fruits and vegetables, which taste best and are often much less pricey than imported out-of-season varieties.
- Visit local farmers and ethnic markets, where produce is often cheap and fresh.

Go generic

- Generic or store brands offer great savings and typically are just as nutritious as their costlier counterparts.

Convenience counts

- Try frozen or canned options if your produce often goes bad. Look for products packed in their own juice or made without salt.
- Stock up on low-cost staples that can stretch meals at little cost. Examples are brown rice, canned tomatoes, dried or canned beans and whole-wheat pasta.

Plan ahead

- Plan your menu to help reduce any waste of produce and other fresh foods.
- Make a shopping list and stick to it. You'll save money with fewer impulse buys.

Don't go to the store hungry

- Being hungry will weaken your resolve. You'll be more tempted to indulge in items that are unhealthy and more costly.

Limit junk food

- Avoid crackers, cookies, sugary beverages and prepared frozen foods, which can be expensive and offer limited nutrition.
- Know when to splurge. Trade the money you might have spent on junk for high-quality, nutritious foods. You may choose to try an exotic new fruit, for example.

All this extra planning, shopping and portioning can take time. But you can feel good knowing it's time well spent. You're filling your body with good food and not draining your wallet.

Emily A. King contributed to this report.

By Jane Schwartz Harrison, RD, Contributing Writer

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