

Nutrition on a Budget

Learn how to eat healthy on a budget

With prices rising at the grocery store and budgets stretched to the limit, healthy foods like whole grains, fresh fruits and vegetables, low fat dairy products and lean meats sometimes seem too expensive to include in your shopping cart. Almost every magazine you read includes penny pinching ideas. Many of the tips are familiar – “buy in bulk, stock up on deals, use coupons.” But these ideas don’t necessarily help you to eat healthy. Saving money on healthy foods means ignoring many of the deals on grocery store shelves. The trick is to use the best savings techniques to help you buy the healthiest foods, without busting your budget – here’s how:

Whole Grains on a Budget:

Nutritious whole grains are inexpensive if you buy them in bulk. With a long shelf life, whole grains like brown rice, steel cut oats, barley and whole wheat pasta can be stored in your pantry for weeks or months at a time. So buy in quantity for less. There are many delicious ways to use these inexpensive, healthy staples in your everyday meals.

When you buy whole grain breakfast cereals, pay less per ounce by buying larger value sized boxes when they are on sale. And if you use manufacturer’s coupons you can add to the savings. The important rule of thumb is to make sure you wait for the deals and coupons on the healthy products – that way you will combine good health and great savings. The last thing you want to do is to stock up on unhealthy products.

You can also save when you buy whole grain breads. Since breads freeze so well, buy more when your favorite is on sale. Double bag in plastic freezer bags to avoid freezer burn. When you buy in bulk it’s easy and much less expensive to follow the experts’ advice of making at least half your grains whole-grains.

Lean Meats for Less Dough

Prime vs. Choice

You can cut your meat budget in half when you buy lean and buy less. Meats can be the most expensive part of a meal. ‘Prime’ cuts such as fillet mignon, or prime rib cost more and are higher in fat. ‘Choice’ cuts are more reasonably priced and lower in fat. The leanest ‘choice’ cuts include top round, eye round or bottom round. Even when you choose the leanest cuts it’s important to watch your portion sizes. The American Heart Association recommends no more than 6 ounces of lean meat per day. By buying lower fat cuts of meat and serving the right portion size, you’ll enjoy great tasting, healthier meals that fit with your budget.

Less Packaging Less Money

Another way to save big is by buying more meat and less packaging. Individually packaged meats, chicken breasts and preformed hamburger patties can cost much more than a whole chicken or bulk packages of lean ground beef. Pre-packaged lunch meats can also rack up your food bill and they are usually high in sodium. A whole fresh turkey breast that you slice yourself is often better for you, tastes great and can save you a bundle. Put your money towards high quality meats not lots of packaging.

Bean Counters

Remember that beef, pork, turkey and chicken are not the only great sources of protein. Beans are a great source of protein, rich in vitamins and have almost no fat. Beans are also one of the best ways to stretch your food budget. Many beans are already household names. Black-eyed peas and lima beans are widely available dry or frozen. Chick peas, fava, pinto,



red kidney, black, and navy beans are available dried or canned. Add them to soups, stews or casseroles, eat them with whole grain rice or use them to top your salads. For pennies a serving, beans are one of the healthiest ways to eat right on a budget.

Low-Fat Dairy for Less:

To save on low-fat dairy consider store brands, sales and package size. When it comes to milk the largest size is the best value. Gallon containers are much cheaper than half gallon or quart sizes per ounce. By buying bigger you can save 30 – 50% for every glass you drink. Low fat and fat free milk can be a little more expensive than carbonated drinks and sweetened beverages but they're a much better value. For less than 25 cents a glass, milk gives you protein, calcium and important vitamins. So redirect some of the money you're spending on other beverages and get calcium rich with a nourishing glass of milk. For low fat yogurts and cheeses, brand name sales and store brand alternatives are the way to go. Skip the individually wrapped, pre-sliced or pre-shredded cheeses and purchase in blocks instead, then shred or slice yourself and save.

Fruits & Vegetables that Don't Break the Bank:

The best way to get great prices on fresh fruits and vegetables is to buy in-season and buy local. In-season produce is almost always more reasonably priced. Look for asparagus, lettuce and peas in spring; berries, tomatoes, and green beans in summer; and apples, broccoli, and sweet potatoes in the fall and early winter. The savings can be big.

Buying fresh fruits and vegetables in bulk is usually not a great savings idea since fresh products can go bad quickly. Here are a few tricks that can help you save when buying fresh:

Shop with a friend: Buy bulk cartons or large bags of apples, oranges, or potatoes. Split the package with a friend. You can save 20-30% or more, without having to bring too much home.

Get creative – Make Fresh, Fun & Convenient: Buy in bulk and then find creative ways to eat more fruits and vegetables. Use simple ideas like storing fruits

and vegetables on the front of the refrigerator shelf where everyone can see them; pre-cut and pack them into convenient 'grab & go' bags.

During the off season, don't forget frozen or canned produce. It's a proven way to save while enjoying the great taste of nutritious fruits and vegetables all year round. Frozen or canned are cheaper, last longer and can be more convenient than fresh. Since they last so long, look for deals and stock-up. Add them to soups, salads, casseroles, side dishes or desserts. When you save money buying frozen or canned, the important thing is to buy healthy. Avoid packages with added sugar, syrup, salt or creamy sauces.

Eating Out on a Dime

Healthy foods can be more expensive when you eat out. But the good news is that most restaurants are including more and more healthy foods on their menus. Many have healthy choices that can fit any budget, if you know where to look. Here are a few suggestions to make eating away from home healthy and affordable:

Fit the meal to your budget: Breakfast and lunch are almost always less expensive than dinner, so plan to eat out earlier in the day and save.

Go for healthy 'value meals': Some of the healthiest meals are also great values. At breakfast, a steaming bowl of oatmeal topped with dried fruit is inexpensive, delicious and good for you.

At lunch, soups and sandwiches or salads can all be great values. Most are reasonably priced everyday and lunch specials often feature even better prices. Remember to customize your order to make it healthier. Go for grilled chicken or roast turkey sandwiches; try lower fat baked chips, choose a bottled water or diet beverage; and use lower calorie salad dressings.

Eating healthy on a tight budget can be a challenge. But 'eating cheap' is not the answer. Look for 'healthy values'. The real goal is finding high quality, wholesome, healthy foods at good prices. Whether you're cooking at home or eating out, there are lots of good deals on good foods.



Since everyone's health history and nutritional needs are so different, please make sure that you talk with your doctor and a registered dietitian to get advice about the diet and exercise plan that's right for you.