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EATING HEALTHY ON A BUDGET

How To Stretch Your Dollars Without Sacrificing Nutrition

By: Dave Kraybill, Executive Director, Pottstown Area Health & Wellness Foundation

Economic downturns have an unwanted effect on countless things for a family. You may have to completely eliminate things that aren't a necessity, cut back on the extras, forgo a big trip, and even scale down the basics. However, there are things that should stay in a household budget, and an important one is buying healthy food.

Often, the perception is that eating healthy is expensive. But, buying healthy food on a budget is not impossible when you follow some simple tips. In fact, eating healthy can actually be LESS expensive than buying pre-packaged and processed convenience foods that contribute to an unhealthy diet.

Remember, if you are feeling stressed it is important to maintain or improve your health, and that can be accomplished, in part, by eating a healthy diet. Eating poorly can break down your immune system and add to your stress by incurring doctor bills or by losing valuable time because you feel tired and listless. Unhealthy eating can also lead to long-term conditions including obesity, diabetes, joint problems, heart disease, and high blood pressure. These health conditions can not only lessen your quality of life, but be costly. Choosing the option to eat healthy, even on a budget, is beneficial in so many ways.

How-To Tips

Following a budget for anything takes initial pre-planning. It is no different for buying food. Figure out what you can spend per month on groceries and be sure to include money for non-food items like cleaning supplies and toiletries. Divide the amount by four to get your weekly total. Below are helpful tips to consider when spending your food dollars:

- Plan your week's menus in advance. You can base your menu on what's on sale at the store or what's already in your fridge nearing expiration. Gather and keep an excellent supply of recipes that you and your family enjoy—variety is key to staying on track.
- Make a list to take to the grocery store based on your pre-planned meals for the week and stick to it—never shop hungry!
- Scour the weekly circulars for specials on items that you use regularly. If the items are not perishable, and your budget allows, stock up.
- Clip coupons, but only use them if they make items you *usually buy* cost even less. The best time to use a coupon is when the item is on special.
- Shop the perimeter of the store first where you'll find the basics for a healthy diet—produce, meats, and dairy—instead of junk food.
- When cooking a big meal, make extra to freeze and use these as your “I don't feel like cooking tonight—I need quick and easy” meals instead of going to a drive-through or buying a family-size frozen dinner or microwavable meal high in sodium and saturated fat (the bad fat).
- Making soups, stews, casseroles and chili will stretch your food dollar.
- Get in the habit of reading unit labels on the shelf to identify the most cost-effective size to buy. Also, don't be brand specific; there are many generic items that cost significantly less and are just as good.
- Consider a membership in a warehouse club—be careful, many of the bulk items would not be considered healthy choices; however, these clubs are great for buying bulk lean meat, low-fat cheese, and fresh or frozen produce.

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- Don't eat out for lunch - it's more expensive and usually not the most healthful meal. Brown bag it for lunch. Plan ahead and make your lunch the night before. Last night's dinner makes great lunches, too.
- Don't eat out for dinner—it's more expensive than cooking and eating at home.

What to Buy

Feeding your family for less with healthy foods is an attainable goal. In fact, it is more easy and cost-effective than you may think. Consider the following:

- Buy in-season, locally-grown foods. These cost less than ones that have to be trucked in from a distance. Many communities have pick-your-own orchards and farms—check them out—they're not only a money saver, but a great family activity!
- Buy produce by the bag—it's cheaper—potatoes, oranges, onions, etc.
- Buy frozen vegetables and fruits that are on sale—these are flash frozen, which locks in the nutrients. They are usually the better choice cost-wise, too, when you want something that is not in season.
- Choose brown rice, couscous, whole grain bread, and whole wheat pasta. These items are not only healthy, but are filling and a great supplement to any meal. Consider pulling out that bread-maker you received as a gift and use it to make inexpensive whole grain breads and pizza dough.
- Buy lean meats and poultry in bulk either at your grocery store or a warehouse club. Package into portions and freeze—skip the ready-to-cook or pre-packaged meats; they are more expensive and can be high in sodium if seasoned.
- Buy foods high in fiber—they are not only good for you, but they are filling.
- Legumes/beans are a wonderfully inexpensive source of protein that can be used as a main meal or to make soups and stews. They are high in fiber and nutrients, and low in calories, plus they are filling.
- Eat fish such as tuna, salmon, and sardines—these are high in omega-3 fat (the good fat) and the cost per serving range is \$.65-\$.75. The canned variety is fine if it's packed in water, not oil.
- Consider eggs and egg whites as a protein source for a meal instead of meat.

What Not to Buy

Knowing what items and foods to avoid buying are just as important as knowing what to put in your shopping cart. Consider the following:

- Resist the urge to buy convenience-packaged foods or individual serving sizes—the lure of convenience is strong, but it's costly. Buy bulk and make your own “snack packs.” Good snack choices include almonds, walnuts, dried fruit, carrot sticks you peel and cut yourself, whole wheat crackers, celery with low-fat peanut butter, and fresh fruit.
- Avoid microwaveable foods, meals-in-a-box, and frozen family dinners—practically everything that you can find in this category can be made from scratch—fresher, cheaper, and healthier, including macaroni & cheese, vegetable or meat lasagna, and chicken nuggets.
- Skip buying expensive bottled water – if your home water is not suitable, invest in a water filter. Also, choose a reusable container made of aluminum or stainless steel instead of plastic.
- Skip buying soft-drinks and pre-mixed iced tea—choose to drink water or low-fat milk instead. If you like iced tea, buy tea bags and make it yourself.
- Forget about junk food—it's expensive and a waste of calories and money—it offers no nutritional value and brings nothing to the table—stock your cupboard and refrigerator with healthy, low-calorie snacks.

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Hopefully, you see that feeding your family a nutritious and delicious meal on a budget is not as daunting or as impossible as you may have thought. There is no magic formula for everyone, but with a little effort, creativity and planning, the reward will be better health and more money in your pocket. Plus, planning menus, cooking together and sitting down at the table to eat will not only save you money and improve your health, but also give you valuable family time. Eating healthy is *so* good for you and your family in *so* many ways!

About the Foundation The Pottstown Area Health & Wellness Foundation's mission is to enhance the health and wellness of area residents, providing education, funding and programs that motivate people to adopt healthy lifestyles. Visit www.pottstownfoundation.org for more information about the Foundation, reliable and accurate health and wellness information, fun and fitness activities, a risk-assessment questionnaire, and much more. Go to www.missiongoodnutrition.org for recipes and a recipe message board, past episodes of *Mission Good Nutrition*, fitness tips and quizzes.