

# Healthy Eating on a Tight Budget

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## Overview

Tips on how to maintain a healthy diet on a tight budget.

- Use Canada's Food Guide
- Make it from scratch
- Have a game plan for shopping
- Check the unit price of items
- Read food labels
- Buy in bulk...when it makes sense
- Eat at home
- Be prepared

When you're on a tight budget, shopping for food can be a daunting experience. It's a common misconception that cutting back on food expenses means sacrificing good nutrition. However, you can be healthier and wealthier by getting wiser about planning meals and shopping. Here are some guidelines that can help:

## Use Canada's Food Guide

Many people plan their meals around meat, and leave grains, vegetables, and fruit for side dishes. However, according to Canada's Food Guide, the bulk of your diet should be made up of whole grains (whole wheat breads and pasta and brown rice), and lots of vegetables and fruit. Meats and dairy products should be treated as side dishes and eaten less frequently. This is not only more economical but more healthful. Here are a few examples of meals made mostly with whole grains, fruits, and vegetables:

- **Chili:** Beans, vegetables, meat, served with a salad
- **Stir-fry:** Vegetables with a small amount of meat served over rice or pasta and a salad
- **Stews or soup:** Beans, vegetables, pasta, rice, meat or chicken, served with salad
- **Taco:** Beans or meat with lots of lettuce, tomato, onions, and a corn tortilla

## Make it from scratch

Many of the pre-packaged, boxed, canned, and frozen foods you buy from the store are high in fat, calories, sodium, sugar, and cost, compared with foods prepared at home. They may also be comparatively lower in vitamins and minerals. You pay for the fancy packaging and convenience of these items, but you get much less for your money. For example, you can make many more bags of popcorn from a bag of unpopped corn compared to buying a bag of already-popped popcorn. The pre-made popcorn is much more expensive and has more fat and sodium than what you can make at home. Of course, making food from scratch may take a little more time, but it can be well worth it in terms of cost and nutrition.

### **Have a game plan for shopping**

Have a game plan for shopping that includes what you're going to buy and where you're going to buy it. "You need to make choices that provide you with the most nutrition for your dollar" says Angela Forbes, RD, County Extension Agent with Clemson University Cooperative Extension in Lancaster, South Carolina. She adds, "without a plan, you risk making impulsive or less nutritious choices and spending too much money."

Here are some tips on developing a shopping plan:

- Plan meals and snacks several days in advance. Then write out a shopping list -- and stick to it!
- Compare prices among grocery stores. Shop at national chains and discount food outlets. Don't shop at convenience stores.
- Go to stores that sell generic foods, store brand foods, and foods in bulk.
- Use coupons with caution. They are often for foods that are more expensive. Don't buy junk food, or something you normally wouldn't buy, just because you have a coupon.
- Never shop on an empty stomach.
- Look for sales on items that are on your list.

"Make sure the food you buy is fresh," says Forbes. "Sometimes food on sale is starting to get old. Always check the dates on perishable items such as meat, because you want it to be safe. If you can't use food before it spoils, you'll just end up wasting it. If you have food in your home that's starting to get old, either find a way to use it right away—put it in another dish, for example—or freeze it."

### **Check the unit prices of items**

The unit price calculates the cost of a product per unit. For example, a unit could be by the ounce, pound, or number of items in a package. Unit prices are usually marked on the shelf below the product. For example, let's say you're looking for canned beets and there are three different brands to choose from. If you look at the unit price below each one, you can find the brand that is cheapest, especially if you buy the largest can. However, it only makes sense to buy the largest can if you're sure you'll use it all.

### **Read food labels**

It's easier to make the most nutritious choice when you know how to read the nutrition facts label. These labels contain the nutritional information and are found on most packaged foods. Use the nutrition facts label to focus on the facts that are most important to you such as the fat, sugar, or sodium content. Nutritional labels make it easier for you to compare similar products.

### **Buy in bulk...when it makes sense**

Save time and money by buying in bulk. You can buy in bulk through supermarkets, buying clubs, food cooperatives, farmer's markets, and warehouses. When you buy in bulk, you can purchase a product in multiple or large units that can be stored, or from an open container in the store, such as a bin of rice where you can scoop out as much as you want. Before buying in bulk, keep the following tips in mind:

- Buy only products that your family will like and use often enough so that they will be used before spoiling or becoming outdated. Otherwise, you'll waste food and money.
- Not all bulk items are bargains. Make sure the item is really a good buy and saves you money. Check the unit price; don't just look at the size of the package.
- When you buy in bulk, you buy more than you can use before your next shopping trip. Be sure you have enough money to do this.
- You should know what type of storage is needed for the product and have enough space to store it.
- Beware that buying in bulk can lead families to overeat or eat too quickly. If this happens, you could run out of food or money before the end of the month. Make sure you can store food so that it won't get eaten too quickly.
- Know proper storage times for different foods. For example:
  - Ground meats: 3–4 months in the freezer
  - Hot dogs: 1–2 months in the freezer
  - Eggs: 3–5 weeks in the refrigerator
  - Dry onions: 2 months in the refrigerator
  - Opened lunch meats: 3–5 days in the refrigerator
  - Flour: lasts longest in the freezer
  - Dried peas and beans: up to 1 year

"You can also prepare food in bulk and freeze the leftovers," says Ms. Forbes. "For example, you can make a big pot of soup or lasagna. Leftovers can be separated into small proportions that are dated and frozen. Don't freeze and then thaw a large portion of food (more than you'll eat in a serving) because you'll end up wasting most of it."

### **Eat at home**

Eating out can be expensive and the food is often high in fat, salt, and sugar. A spaghetti dinner at a restaurant could cost \$10 or more, but only a few dollars if you prepared it at home. At a restaurant, your extra costs go toward profits and tips. Consider having a potluck. When you entertain guests at home, ask them to bring a dish.

### **Be prepared**

If you're going to be out running errands or shopping with your family, bring some healthy snacks and drinks with you. That way, if hunger hits, you won't be tempted to stop at a fast food restaurant or buy snacks from a vending machine—something that can hurt your wallet and your waistline. Whether you make snacks at home or buy them from the grocery store, it's less expensive than buying them in the mall.

### **RESOURCES:**

#### **Canada's Food Guide**

[www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/food-guide-aliment/index\\_e.html](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/food-guide-aliment/index_e.html)

#### **Dietitians of Canada**

[www.dietitians.ca](http://www.dietitians.ca)

#### **American Dietetic Association**

[www.eatright.org](http://www.eatright.org)

#### **Georgia Southern Health Education**

<http://services.georgiasouthern.edu>

### **References:**

Clemson University Cooperative Extension. Available at:  
<http://virtual.clemson.edu/groups/extension>.

University of Vermont Cooperative Extension. Available at:  
<http://www.uvm.edu/extension/>.

Last reviewed May 2008 by Dianne Scheinberg MS, RD, LDN

Please be aware that this information is provided to supplement the care provided by your physician. It is neither intended nor implied to be a substitute for professional medical advice. **CALL YOUR HEALTHCARE PROVIDER IMMEDIATELY IF YOU THINK YOU MAY HAVE A MEDICAL EMERGENCY.** Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health provider prior to starting any new treatment or with any questions you may have regarding a medical condition.