

Families Taking Charge: Eating Well for Less

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Eating well is important for you and your family's health. Unfortunately, food is often very expensive and can be difficult to buy with a limited income, especially during a crisis. The good news is that there are several ways in which you and your family can in fact eat well for less. The key to lowering food cost is to plan ahead and keep track of every food dollar spent, making sure it fits into your budget.

What are Your Food-Buying Resources?

Cash, Food Stamps, WIC Program, School Lunch Program, etc., or all of the above?

Many resources are often available and can be used together to help lower food cost. Check into them through your local food stamp office, health department, and school system. Make sure you count all your resources when figuring how much money you have available for food. This will help you plan nutritious meals that fit your pocketbook.

In addition, you may also want to consider food co-ops, planting a vegetable garden, fishing, and hunting to help lower food cost and in meal planning.

Ways to Lower Food Cost

Changing the amount of money you usually spend for food may be difficult. Listed below are several suggestions to help you lower your food bill.

- This amount of money can be divided by 4 in order to get a weekly amount that can be spent on food.
 - Plan weekly menus ahead of time using special sales, seasonal foods such as fruits and vegetables, coupons, foods you already have, and your family tastes. Be sure to include a variety of foods. For examples of weekly menus, recipes, and use of leftovers, contact your local Extension or EFNEP Office for a copy of "Making Food Dollars Count - Nutritious Meals At Low Cost."
 - Make a shopping list of only the foods that you need. Then be sure to stick to the list while shopping.
 - Do not shop when you are tired, hungry, or rushed.
 - Buy store and/or generic brands of good quality when possible.
 - Read labels to make good food choices. Many foods are often high in fat, salt, and sugar.
 - Compare food prices at different stores.
 - Use unit pricing to get best buy.
 - Check the date on food items to make sure they are good and as fresh as possible.
 - Shop at a store that has low priced, good quality foods that you usually buy.
 - When possible, shop at two different stores to get the best buys, but make sure that shopping at several different stores does not cost too much extra time and transportation.
 - Use food coupons only for foods needed.
- Figure out how much money you can afford to spend on food for the month. Should you need help with this, contact your local Virginia Cooperative Extension office for publications on how to budget your money and spend less.

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- Buy only amounts of food needed and/or that can be safely stored.
- Stay away from foods you do not need such as snack foods and soda pop.
- Put newer foods in back of the refrigerator, freezer and cabinet shelves.
- Foods that tend to spoil easily should be used quickly or frozen when possible.

Additional Hints:

- Cut down on meals away from home. Pack lunches, snacks and even beverages, such as juice, for family members to take to work or school. Try to avoid the use of vending machines, for these foods are generally quite expensive.
- Spend time preparing foods and cut the extra costs of convenience; for example, make homemade chili instead of using canned chili.
- Never throw away leftovers. Mix small portions of vegetables together or use them along with meats in stew or soup.
- Look for carts with fruits, vegetables, and breads that have been marked down in price. Day-old bread and ripened produce are good buys.
- Use non-fat dry milk instead of fluid milk.
- Do not buy grated cheese or wrapped cheese slices—they cost more.
- Select lean (not much fat) meat, poultry, and fish, and do not buy meat pieces with large bones.
- Hide food so it isn't eaten all at once. Try to make food last so it is there when you need it.
- Drink water rather than soda or sweetened juice.
- Use meat alternates such as legumes (dried beans and peas), eggs, and peanut butter to extend meats and lower food cost.

REMEMBER: Be sure to plan ahead and keep track of how much money you spend. Try to make your food dollars, stamps, etc., last throughout the month.

Planning Meals

Plan meals at least one week ahead of time. This helps to save time, effort, and especially money. Preplanning helps you to use the foods you already have, saving trips to the grocery store and making use of leftovers. When grocery shopping you will know exactly what foods you need and how much, allowing you to compare prices, read food labels, and make good quality food choices. Also, preplanned quick meals can replace more costly convenience items and restaurant meals. You can increase food variety by planning ahead - try to be creative! Poor food choices such as foods high in fat, salt, and sugar can be avoided by careful meal planning.

When planning meals, it is important that you always include a variety of foods from the 5 food groups to make sure that you and your family get all the nutrients needed for good health. The 5 food groups and servings needed are:

FOOD GROUP	DAILY SERVINGS
Vegetables	3-5
Fruits	2-4
Breads, Cereal, Rice, and Pasta	6-11
Milk, Yogurt, and Cheese	2-3
Meats, Poultry, Fish, Dry Beans and Peas, Eggs, and Nuts	2-3

For healthier eating avoid too many fats and sweets, as well as foods high in salt. Choose lean meats. Cut off excess fat and remove skin from chicken and/or turkey. Bake or broil foods instead of frying. Go easy on sauces, dressings, and gravies. Choose sandwich items such as tuna fish, peanut butter, hard-cooked eggs, etc., instead of lunch meats, which are generally higher in fat. Add dried beans or peas to your diet. They are very nutritious, low in fat, and are cheap in comparison to meat, poultry and fish.

Food Choices

Once you have planned your meals, it is important to make the right food choices in regard to cost as well as quality. Compare costs of different brands and read the label. Make sure you are getting your money's worth.

Unit Pricing

What is unit pricing? It is a method to show exactly how much a food costs per ounce, pound, quart, gallon, etc. The unit price can be used to figure out which brand or size is a better buy. Unit prices are usually located on the shelf right below the food item.

For example, if a 16 oz. (1 lb) can of peaches costs 49 cents and a 1 lb and 13 oz. can costs 63 cents, it's hard to figure out which is a better buy. With unit pricing, you can find the unit price for each, and then determine which is a better buy. In this case the larger size is a better buy for its unit price per pound is 35 cents instead of 49 cents for the smaller can of peaches.

Read the Label and Set a Better Table

Food labels provide important information such as the name of the food, its description, its weight, and style of pack. Most labels also have a list of ingredients. The ingredients are listed in the order of the amount (by weight) in the food. This can be quite helpful when deciding what kind of food(s) you want in your diet. Often water or sugar is listed first or second, and many foods contain lots of fat and/or salt. You must ask yourself if this is the kind of food you want and if this is how you really want to spend your money.

Read the label on all the foods you buy. That way you can choose your foods wisely, pay for foods that you want, and actually get more for your money.

Food Dollar Snitchers

Food dollar snitchers can add up quickly and be quite costly to your pocketbook, so try to avoid them. Examples of food dollar snitchers are:

- Impulse buying (buying a food item not really needed).
- Food spoilage. Be sure to wrap and store foods correctly (refrigerator, freezer, etc.)
- Poor or incorrect storage can cause mold, wilting, drying out, bacterial spoilage, and staleness of food(s).
- Buying non-food items such as cleaning supplies, cosmetics, magazines, pet food, etc., with your food money.

- Buying low nutrition foods such as colas, chips, cookies, doughnuts, cakes, chocolates, candy, etc.
- Buying individually packaged servings.

Shopping Lists

Keep a piece of paper near the refrigerator for jotting down items as you need them. This will help prevent unnecessary trips to the grocery store.

Shopping Tips

Grocery shopping takes time and is often difficult when you must take your children with you. Here are some helpful hints to make shopping a little easier and a more pleasurable experience.

- Shop when the store is less crowded, usually in the morning or on Wednesdays.
- Shopping in the morning also means that you are well rested, a plus for shopping.
- Shop consistently in two or more stores, and know where the foods are located.
- Be sure to have a shopping list made ahead of time so you can shop quickly. Let older children help you make the list.
- It helps to organize your list; have the same type of foods listed together such as meats, breads, fruits, vegetables, dairy products, etc. This will also save time and energy.
- Do not go shopping hungry - feed yourself and your children before you go so you will not be tempted to buy foods not on your list.
- Let your children help when possible. Preschool children can point out items that are on your list. Older children can get non-breakable items found on lower shelves.
- Occasionally let your children pick out a new nutritious food that they would like to try. This adds variety to their diet and makes them feel important at the same time.
- Explain the importance of shopping and buying nutritious foods to your children. Soon they will learn to make wise food choices themselves and help keep food costs down.

- Try to make shopping a pleasurable experience for you and your children.

Now that suggestions have been made for lowering your food bill, try them for a while. Should you have any problems or questions, please feel free to contact/call your area Extension or EFNEP Office.

Adapted From

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