

# BETTER SHOPPING *on a budget*



Some people think eating healthfully costs too much. However, the cost you pay to eat healthfully is a smart investment when you consider the annual cost of obesity and other nutrition-related health conditions in the United States.

You don't have to spend a lot of money to get the most nutrition for your dollars. It simply requires taking an honest look at your spending habits, planning ahead, getting the facts, dispelling myths and learning a few tricks along the way.

**Shop from a list.** Research shows that people who shop without a list tend to buy more food. Plan a week's worth of healthy meals before you head to the store, then make a list of the ingredients that you'll need. A list will help control temptation.

**Be a comparison shopper.** Compare prices, both before heading out and after you're inside the store. Be sure to check not only the price but also the quantity. It's not uncommon for food manufacturers to reduce the package weight rather than increase the price. Before you know it, you're getting less food for your money and you didn't even notice! Compare brands carefully, and use the "price per" reference labels found on the shelves. They help ensure you are getting the most product for your money. Go online or look in the paper to check out the store's latest promotions or weekly specials.

**Use store brands.** In-house brands can save you a significant amount of money over brand names without sacrificing nutritional value. If you have a preference for certain brands, stock up when they are on sale or you have a coupon. But remember...just because you have a coupon doesn't mean that it's the best deal.

**Stock "whole food" starchy staples.** Always have beans, lentils, peas, brown rice, pasta, oatmeal, quinoa and barley in your pantry. Barley, quinoa, lentils and brown rice add fiber and are great additions to stretch dishes like soups, stews and casseroles. Beans, lentils and peas are great sources of protein and fiber. Add them to salads or marinara sauce to pump up the fiber (and protein) in pasta dishes. Save money on utilities and cook a large batch of beans at once and freeze.

**Stock up on nonperishable sale items.** Visit your favorite supermarket online before you head out and see what's on sale. You can often get great deals on healthy nonperishable items like low-sodium canned vegetables, unsweetened canned fruit, dried beans, peanut butter, tuna and other items. Every week, check the frozen vegetable section and buy what's on sale so you always have a variety on hand.

**Shop in season and buy the weekly produce specials.** Fresh produce costs less when it's in season. Don't feel like you have to always have certain fruits (or other produce). If you buy the sale items, you'll have variety from week to week. Stock up on whatever is on sale: so one week your fruit-of-the-week is peaches and strawberries, the next week it's apples and grapes. Visit a farmers market. Local farmers often discount fruit bought by the peck or bushel.

**Cut, shred and chop food yourself.** Many foods are available pre-cut, shredded or chopped, but you'll pay for the convenience. The few minutes you'll spend preparing the food yourself will likely save a lot in your food budget.

**Store wisely to prevent spoilage.** Improperly stored foods will spoil quickly, and if it spoils before you can eat it, you've wasted money. Store fresh produce in the refrigerator to retard the ripening process. Wrapping greens and other high water content vegetables in paper towels before placing in plastic bags will help to prevent premature spoilage.

**Go meatless several times a week.** Meat is usually the most expensive part of the meal, so going meatless will save money. Use beans, peas, lentils or soy for your entrées instead of meat. Or extend your recipe by using half meat and half beans. Many favorite recipes can easily be made meatless—tacos, lasagna, chili, casseroles, spaghetti, soups, stews, pasta, enchiladas and burritos.

**Make your own microwaveable or frozen meals.** Prepare a little extra food (i.e. extra meat, potato/starch and vegetables) for your meal and make your own microwaveable meal for the next day's lunch. When cooking ahead, double your recipes and freeze half in reusable containers. Recipes like chili, soup, casseroles and entrees freeze well. You'll save money (and reduce your sodium intake) by making your own meals.

**Clip coupons or take advantage of shopping card discounts.** Put your coupons and cards in a convenient place where you will remember to use them. Look for BOGO (buy one get one) deals, but use caution with other purchasing combination sales strategies (like buy three get the fourth free). They will cause you to spend more money in the short-term, and you may actually purchase more than you'll use.

**Buy in bulk if it's a bargain and you can use it.** Many stores offer "family pack" price reductions. Take advantage of these price savings and freeze the extras. Or check out large discount warehouses, which may help you save money. Partner with friends, families or neighbors to buy in bulk to save if you have a small household. But always check prices carefully—bulk purchases don't guarantee the best bargain.

**Make your own single-serving snack packs.** Purchase large bags of healthy snack foods—like whole-grain crackers, baked chips, pretzels, nuts or other low-fat snacks—and make up your own snack packs using plastic zipper snack bags.

**Drink tap water.** Save money by drinking tap water. Many studies have shown that community tap and well water is similar in quality to bottled water. (Some communities bottle their tap water and sell it.) If your local water isn't great tasting, invest in a filter for your tap or pick up a filtering pitcher. Either way, you'll save money.

**Reduce, reuse, recycle and save.** Take your own shopping bags to reuse. Some stores give you a credit for bringing your own bags. Take your recyclable metal to the local metal recycling center and earn money for your food budget and help the environment at the same time.

**Avoid vending machines.** You're paying for convenience, and convenience is often very expensive. You can pay 75 cents for a granola bar out of the vending machine or less than two dollars for an entire box. Bring your own beverages and stock a healthy snack drawer. Or pull your resources and start up your own office snack shop. Put the money you save into buying fresh produce at the grocery store.

**Limit dining out.** Eating out may be part of our American culture, but if saving money and eating healthfully are on your agenda, dining out can make a considerable dent in your weekly food budget. Regardless of the deal, it's always more expensive in the long-run to eat away from home. Consider packing your lunch, and cut back on dining out when possible. Another way to save is to forego ordering beverages and stick with water. Most restaurants charge \$1.50 to \$2.00 for beverages. While refills may be unlimited, multiply the cost times the number in your party and you'll discover you're spending a lot on drinks alone. Water is free.

