

# Controlling Food Costs



Getting your money's worth in food these days? Want to try to save money and eat healthier, too? Here are some ideas to help you beat high food costs.

## Plan Ahead

- **Make a plan** of the meals and snacks you want to have for the week, or whatever time frame you will be shopping for. Then check your fridge, cupboards, pantry – where ever you keep your food – to see what you already have on hand.
- **Check newspaper ads or store flyers** to see what is on sale. Use this to help you plan meals and snacks.
- **Write a list** of the food you need to buy. Organize the list in a way that makes sense to you...by food group, by grocery store section.
- **BRING THE LIST WITH YOU!** Studies show that without a list, you can spend almost twice as much. Follow it, but be flexible. If you see something on sale that you know you will use, buy it even if it's not on your list.



## Shop Carefully

Try to **eat something before you go shopping**. You will spend more if you are hungry.  
Try to **go alone**. You will spend more and maybe not take the time you need to read labels or compare prices if you are distracted by your kids, your husband, your friends.

- **Read labels** so you know what you are paying for. The “Nutrition Facts” label gives you lots of information such as how many calories, fat, sodium, fiber, protein, added sugar in a serving, what IS a serving, how many servings are in the package, and a little on vitamins and minerals.
- The **ingredients list** can tell a lot...ingredients are listed in order from most to least. Try to avoid buying cereals and cake mixes where sugar and high fructose-corn syrup are the first or second ingredients.
- **Use unit pricing** and food labels to compare cost of similar food items. When there is little difference in ingredients or nutrition, choose the store or generic brand.
- **Use coupons wisely**. Often they promote new products that may be highly refined and processed. If you don't need it, you won't save anything by buying it. Use coupons for food you would buy anyway, and for non-food items like detergent, pet food, paper towels and shampoo.

- **Take advantage of sales.** Buy 1-get 1 free may be a good deal, but maybe not! Look at the unit cost...sometimes the cost per pound is really high and you do not save very much in the long run. But if it is something you would get anyway, go for it!
- **Stock up on sale items** you use often, if you have the room to store them safely. For example, don't get an extra 10 pounds of potatoes if you only eat potatoes once in a while and don't have a cool, dry place to keep them.
- **Don't go up and down every aisle!** If you know what you need to buy, just go down the aisles where those foods are found. The sides and the back of the store are where you find fresh food – fruits and vegetables, the deli counter, bread and bakery items, meat, fish, milk, cheese, eggs, juice and other refrigerated foods.

## Keep it simple

Stick to more **basic, natural, nutritious** foods rather than ready-to-eat, highly processed and highly refined foods. When they do it for you, it usually costs more. One of the best money-saving tricks is to **know how to cook** and fix healthy meals and snacks.

Even when processed foods are cheaper, they are usually higher in salt, sugar, fat and artificial ingredients and lower in fiber, vitamins and minerals. While they may be ok to eat once in a while, choose more nutritious foods to eat every day.

Refined processed food:.

Soda, soft drinks fruit drinks

Sweetened cereal

Cake, cookie, brownie mixes and packaged desserts

Candy

Whipped topping

Snack chips

Hot dogs, bacon, cold cuts

Heat and serve meals

Instant soups and lunches

Salad Dressing

More nutritious choices:

Unsweetened fruit juice, water, low fat milk

Whole grain and unsweetened cereals

Bran or corn muffin mix, homemade quick breads and whole grain cookies.

Mix of dried fruit, nuts and sunflower seeds

Small amount of yogurt or frozen yogurt

Homemade popcorn, lightly salted: unsalted dry roasted nuts or natural nuts

Whole grain crackers

Tuna, cooked chicken or leftover cooked meat

Homemade casseroles, stir-fry, sandwiches,

Homemade burritos

Cheese and crackers, hard-cooked eggs, homemade soup, nuts, salad

Make your own with oil, vinegar and herbs, low fat mayonnaise or plain yogurt

## Watch portion size

If you need to lose weight, **eat smaller portions** to help save money.



### Meat

One serving of meat is about 3 ounces ... the size of a deck of cards or the palm of your hand. Many Americans eat too much meat.

- Use meat in soup, stew, chili, casseroles, stir fry, sauces, salads and skillet meals. A pound of meat can go far when you combine it with vegetables, rice, beans, grains or pasta and season with herbs. Gourmet cooks and cooks in other countries use meat this way all the time. Try spaghetti with clam sauce, chili con carne, skillet chicken with canned diced tomatoes and garlic, stir fry pork or chicken with broccoli, fish chowder.
- Add rolled oats to ground beef or turkey, moisten with a little tomato sauce or beaten egg. Use it for patties or meatloaf.
- Look for specials on meat, poultry and fish. If you have a freezer, you could stock up.
- Plan more meatless meals. Eggs, milk, yogurt and cheese (except cream cheese) have high quality animal protein like that in meat, fish or poultry.
- Dried beans, nuts, lentils split peas, and grains have vegetable protein that can be used with small amounts of meat or combined for healthy vegetarian meals.



### Fruit and vegetables

Vegetables and fruit in season can be your best nutritional buy. They are high in vitamins, minerals and fiber; low in calories, sugar, fat and salt. And eating at least five servings of fruits and vegetables a day may help lower your risk for cancer, diabetes and heart disease.

One serving is ½ cup cooked, canned, frozen or chopped vegetables, ½ cup cut up fruit or berries, 1 medium piece of fruit or vegetable (like a potato or tomato), ¾ cup 100% juice.

- Buy fresh, frozen or canned fruits and vegetables for meals and snacks. Choose canned or frozen fruit packed in juice or water, unsweetened. Canned vegetables may have lots of salt, so choose the unsalted version when possible. Frozen vegetables in sauce are usually expensive and high in salt. Stock up on canned tomatoes, canned dried beans like kidney beans, chick peas, pinto beans, pink or white beans, and other canned foods when they are on sale.
- For snacks and dessert, have fresh fruit in season. Mix fresh or canned fruit to make a fruit salad. Have it with plain yogurt. Keep raw cut-up vegetables in the refrigerator for lunches and snacks.
- For meals, use vegetables as a base for soup, casseroles and stir-fry meals. Use vegetables and fruits in salads or use fruits and vegetables in baking (bran muffins with raisins, carrot cake, pumpkin cookies, apple crisp)
- Drink 100% juice. Juice drinks are mostly water and are high in sugar. Although they may have added vitamin C, they are low in other important nutrients. If you find that you or your kids drink a lot of juice, dilute it with water or seltzer to save on calories and money.

October 2004