

Eating Well on a Budget

From the supermarket to the kitchen, here are some strategies to get the biggest nutrition bang for your buck.

An all-too-common mantra says, “It’s too expensive to eat healthy.” It’s true that when comparing specific foods like organic fruits with conventional fruits, the former tends to be a few dollars more per pound. And when a shopping cart filled with fresh produce, poultry, and fish is compared to one loaded with boxes of macaroni and cheese, ground hamburger, and cookies, the latter will likely ring lower at the cash register.

Certainly, policy improvements and other actions are needed to create a food environment where the healthy choice is the easy and accessible choice. In the meantime, know that creating nutritious meals can be more affordable than one might think.

A NOTE ON FOOD AFFORDABILITY

If you (or someone you know) are struggling with food access, there are several options to help. Along with a nationwide network of food pantries, the U.S. federal government offers food assistance programs for citizens and legal noncitizens whose income meets certain guidelines and/or who have certain nutritional needs.

Learn more about navigating these resources: hsph.me/sup20



Shop your pantry first. Commit to taking inventory of all the food in your kitchen twice a month. Bring forward the buried items and use what you have before buying more.

Consider meatless meals. Plant-based proteins are nutritious and generally more affordable than meats and fish. If you still crave meat, incorporate smaller amounts, while focusing on plant proteins like canned beans or tofu so that you can save on cost, increase volume of the meal, and boost nutrition and heartiness.

Don’t shop on an empty stomach. Munch on a piece of fruit or some nuts before entering the store.



Purchase foods and snacks that are satiating and filling. How easy is it to eat a half a package of chips in one sitting? In contrast, how many apples or handfuls of nuts can you eat at one time? Even though a 3-pound bag of apples may cost \$4.00 versus \$2.50 for a large bag of chips, consider which will satisfy your hunger longer.

Scan the discounted produce cart that usually sits in a corner. This cart is filled with fruits and veggies starting to age but still tasty if you can eat them the same day or the next day.



Shop with a list, but allow for flexibility if items like fresh produce or poultry and fish are on sale. If they are foods you enjoy, you might purchase extra quantities and freeze them for later use. Fresh meats, fish, and some produce (bananas, berries, avocados, broccoli, cauliflower, Brussels sprouts) generally freeze well. Be sure to label and date the bags or containers before placing in the freezer!

Plan out a few meals you want to prepare the next week and create your shopping list based on those ingredients. Although it takes a bit more effort up front, meal prep can ultimately help save time and money, as well as reduce the stress that comes with last-minute decisions about what to eat. Some quick tips to get you started:

- ✓ Discuss with your family what types of foods and favorite meals they like to eat.
- ✓ Start a monthly calendar or spreadsheet to record your meal ideas, favorite recipe sites, and food shopping lists.
- ✓ Consider specific meals or foods for different days of the week: Stir-Fry Mondays, Fish Fridays, etc.



Access the full meal prep guide along with recipes that lend well to bigger batches at hsph.me/pre20



Consider purchasing nonperishable staple foods in bulk. Even though it may cost more upfront to buy “family-sized” packages of products like whole grains, lentils, and dried beans, the cost per unit is usually cheaper. To determine this, find the common unit of measurement when comparing two products. For example, a bag of brown rice may be in pounds. Divide the price by total pounds, which is the price per unit.

 <p>Brown Rice 1-lb. \$1.59</p>	<p>Price per unit: \$1.59/lb.</p>
 <p>Brown Rice 5-lbs. \$3.99</p>	<p>Price per unit: \$0.80/lb.</p>

Buy generic or store-brand. You will notice when comparing the ingredients list that similar if not identical ingredients are used. The generic brand is generally cheaper because less money is spent on advertising and creating fancy food labels.

Stretch your fresh herbs. Unless a recipe calls for a whole package (e.g. a bunch of basil for pesto), you’ll be left with extra sprigs. Careful storage can help extend the shelf life (e.g. cilantro in a cup of water covered with a bag), but if you don’t plan on using within one week, consider other ways to extend their utility. One idea is to chop and freeze herbs in an ice cube tray filled with olive oil—ready to be popped in a pan to sauté vegetables.



Don’t buy more highly perishable items than you can use in one week (unless you plan to freeze them), or else you run the risk of spoilage and waste. Foods with short shelf-life include some bagged salad greens, mushrooms, berries, avocados, and bananas.

Eat attentively. Practicing mindfulness during meals can increase enjoyment of the food. You may even be satisfied with smaller portions.