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A Low-Cost Bill Of Health

Dietitians Dish Out Advice On Filling Your Plate Without Emptying Your Pockets

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If you're looking to stretch your grocery dollars, the freezer is your friend. So are store brands, sales, grocery-store circulars, unit prices and shopping lists.

Just because you're watching expenses doesn't mean you have to give up on healthful, delicious food, dietitians say.

"The perception is eating healthier costs more," says registered dietitian Teresa Dotson, owner of Nutrition Solutions for Life in Canton.

Healthful eating on a budget takes planning. If you do the work ahead, it's cheaper than picking up prepared food or take-out on the way home from work, she says.

She suggests looking at the week as a whole. For example: chicken for Sunday dinner, then chicken soup or chicken salad made from the leftovers during the week.

One of the simplest ways to save time and money is to create a grocery list and shop from the list once a week. Every trip to the store not only consumes gas, but typically results in the purchase of more items, Dotson says.

She suggests sitting down with the grocery-store circular, planning your week's menu and writing your grocery list based on what's on sale and what you need.

Try to use what you already have, and avoid buying spices you'll use only once or twice, suggests says D. Milton Stokes, a registered dietitian and owner of One Source Nutrition in South Windsor and Stamford.

To avoid repeated trips to the store for milk, buy multiple gallons, and freeze some, he says. Milk will keep in the freezer for three months.

Produce Secrets

Everyone should eat five servings a day of fruits and vegetables — about 4 ½ cups, says registered dietitian Maryanne Mead, who has offices in Wallingford, Glastonbury and Branford.

Dietitians say frozen and canned produce is a fine alternative to fresh produce, especially during the winter when fresh fruits are expensive. Fruits and vegetables are frozen immediately after picking at facilities near the growing fields, Dotson says. And since bruised produce doesn't freeze well, only the choicest produce is frozen.



Even on sale, fresh produce may be more expensive than frozen. (At Shaw's recently, fresh green beans were on sale for \$2.49 a pound, but a bag of frozen green beans was \$1.)

And it's cheaper to buy canned fruit in syrup than in water or juice, Dotson says, so if you buy it that way, drain the syrup, and rinse with water.

To help keep bagged salads fresh, put a paper towel in the bag, suggests Stokes. It will absorb moisture and keep the lettuce from getting slimy for another day or two.

"When you think of fruits vs. meats, fruits are cheaper," Mead says.

In fact, when determining portion sizes, Dotson says, half the plate should be filled with produce, one-quarter with protein and one-quarter with whole grains or starch.

"Think of meat as the side dish, not the main dish," she suggests.

Cook In Quantity

Cooking extra rice, pasta, potatoes or hard-boiled eggs and using them for another meal also saves time and energy, says Stokes. "Cook once; eat twice."

He suggests making larger quantities of meals on the weekends and freezing the extra in ready-to-eat portions. Make a big batch of sauce or chili, freeze in small containers, and it's less likely to spoil.

Use leftovers for lunch or dinner within a few days. Extra chicken or eggs can be made into chicken or egg salad that can be served in a sandwich for lunch or atop a salad.

Cooked chicken, turkey and ham can be sliced for sandwiches as an economical alternative to cold cuts.

Whole Grains

Shoppers have several ways to buy whole grains and save money, dietitians say. Typically, the store brand of whole grain bread is just as nutritious and much less expensive than the national brand.

Look for day-old bread from the bakery on the rolling shelves at the end of an aisle. Its price is usually drastically reduced.

Dietitians recommend buying oatmeal in tubs and adding your own sugar and walnuts or almonds rather than buying the individual packets.

"Packets that are pre-flavored have more sugar and sodium," Stokes says, and they're more expensive. But if it's a choice between the oatmeal packets or skipping breakfast, by all means go for the convenience item, he adds.

When shopping with kids, don't let them pick out the cereal because the high sugar cereals most kids like tend to be high in price and low in whole grains, he says. Instead, select two whole-grain cereal options and let them choose from your selection.

There are whole-grain options for pita bread, tortillas, English muffins and hamburger buns.

Protein

"Protein sources are where a lot of your money can go," Mead says. There are several ways to save on proteins.

First, reduce your protein portion to the size of a deck of cards. (One half of a chicken breast is a portion, Dotson

says.) You need 6 ounces of protein a day.

Compare the unit price of items on sale, suggests Dotson, because the skinless, boneless chicken on sale may be less than the cuts that include bones and skin.

Prepackaged cold cuts are generally more expensive than those sold on sale at the deli, she says. On a recent trip to Shaw's, a 7-ounce pre-packaged container of turkey was \$4.49, or about \$10 per pound, while a few feet away at the deli, turkey was selling for \$4 and \$5 per pound.

Eggs are a low-cost, nutritious source of protein and healthy fat, Stokes says. Because they delay digestion, they help you feel satisfied longer.

Stokes and other dietitians praise eggs. "People have demonized eggs and egg yokes because of cholesterol, and it's not based on science at all," he says. "You can eat two eggs per day, even if you have high cholesterol. Eggs are very low in trans fat and saturated fat."

Fat

"We've become a fat-obsessed society," Stokes says. He suggests regular mayonnaise in moderation rather than the more expensive fat-free mayonnaise.

Same goes for salad dressings. "A lot of fat-free dressings have the fat removed with added sugar," he says. "It's healthier and often cheaper to use the regular fat dressing."

Savvy Shopping Tips

"Look for products [produce and baked goods] that may be on sale because they're approaching their 'sell-by' date. If you know you can buy them and use them or freeze them, do it," Stokes says. "You can save a couple of dollars and quality is not diminished."

Try to avoid going down the aisles, as the sale items are on the ends and most of what you need is along the perimeter, Dotson says.

Read the unit prices and don't be fooled by "100-calorie packs," which, says Dotson, are a marketing ploy that she considers "the biggest rip-off." For instance, 100-calorie packets of Chex-mix were selling for \$12.15 a pound.

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