



Dietitian's Corner



AMANDA THUL, RD, LD
HCMH DIETITIAN

Making the Most of Your Food Dollar

As a dietitian, I often hear the concern that healthy eating is too expensive. Now, in the pandemic world we live in, this is a truth more families are living than ever before. There is a stigma with healthy eating that it's either all or nothing. Meaning, if your diet isn't 100% the healthiest food then it's not worth trying. Along with this, fresh and organic seem to be labeled as the healthiest in consumer eyes. These foods are normally the most expensive so no wonder people believe healthier eating on a budget isn't attainable. The good news is healthy eating is focused on balanced eating (not all or nothing) and can be an achievable goal when shopping on a food budget. Here's how to make it work.

Choose canned, dried, and frozen produce over fresh. Yes, you heard that right! It's been proven many times that canned, dried, and frozen fruits and vegetables are just as nutritious as their fresh or cooked counter parts and in some instances, even more nutritious. Look for canned and frozen vegetables with no salt added or no sauces/seasoning. Canned and frozen fruit with no added sugar or in natural juice prevents any added sugars. These are great options to increase fruit and veggie intake, something that most Americans do not get enough of, while being less expensive than fresh. They have a longer shelf life than fresh which

makes them great to stock up on when money is more plentiful knowing you don't need to worry about spoilage.

Meats tend to be the most expensive in our diet—especially lean meat which is recommended. When preparing fattier meat, cut off what fat you can and always drain the excess grease of the ground meat after browning. Swap some of your meat during the week for dried or canned beans (black, kidney, pinto...etc) and canned tuna. They are a great source of protein and other healthful nutrients like fiber (beans) and healthy fats (tuna). Plus a lot more affordable! Canned beans and tuna are convenient because they require little preparation. Look for canned beans with no added salt and canned tuna in water.

When buying grain products (bread, pasta, rice...etc) compare the labels for fiber. The higher the fiber, the more nutritious. Fortunately, the higher fiber whole grains aren't always more expensive than the refined grain version. Examples of these are whole wheat bread, whole grain pasta, brown or wild rice, higher fiber cereals, whole grain/higher fiber crackers. Play around with experimenting with different whole grains that have a similar cost to the refined grain you would normally buy (white bread, regular pasta, white rice, regular crackers, sweetened cereal).

To really make the most

of your grocery budget, it's helpful to make a list of a few meals you'd like to make during the week. This helps insure you're spending your food dollar on something you'll turn into a nutritious meal. Looking for recipe inspiration? Check out ISU extension Spend Smart Eat Smart website for affordable balanced recipes that even have the cost per serving listed on the recipe! Take a look at what you have in your pantry/fridge/freezer and try to incorporate these items into your meals to use up what you have. Check out the weekly grocery ad at the store you shop for the best deals and try to stick mostly to these foods. If an item isn't on sale, see if you can hold off for another week or 2 before buying it in case it goes on sale soon. Try online grocery shopping. This is a great way to watch your total as you add items to the cart before you even check out. Most stores that offer this do not charge a fee if you go to the store to pick up your grocery order.

Bottom line, focus on using foods in different forms (canned, frozen, dried, fresh) to increase variety in an affordable way to eat as balanced of a diet as you can right now with the resources you have. Healthy eating isn't all or nothing and isn't the most expensive foods. Each small change that you're able to make does make a difference.