

Balancing Act!

Eating Well on a Budget

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Is a healthy diet really affordable? There are arguments on both sides. Shrinking food budgets may shift choices to cheaper, calorie-rich, nutrient-poor foods. But rising food costs might actually encourage more Americans to adjust their eating habits and guide them back to the basics of eating well. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the answer to the affordability question is yes. The USDA has created four Food Plans to meet dietary and MyPyramid.gov guidelines at different cost levels (thrifty, low cost, moderate cost and liberal). Based on retail food prices, the plans estimate the cost of food when all meals and snacks are prepared at home.

Plan Ahead at Home: Not planning meals and not creating a shopping list are two mistakes that cost shoppers more in the end. Planning is essential to eating well, especially when dollars don't reach as far as they once did. Try these Meal-Planning Tips:

- Check your fridge and cupboards to see what you already have on hand that can be used.
- Plan meals around the best weekly store specials.
- Use coupons only for items you already buy.
- Get inspired by exploring one of the many online recipe finders, or check out a cookbook from the library.
- Use leftovers, to save time and money.

Keep a running shopping list and jot down items when you run out. Add ingredients needed for planned meals and snacks. To make shopping easier, organize the list around your grocery store layout. You can write a shopping list on a pad of paper, create a checklist of foods on the computer or, of course, there's an app for that.

Keep all your weekly meal plans. In no time, you'll have a monthly menu cycle and a "go-to" list of quick meals. Creating a weekly meal plan and shopping list means fewer last-minute trips to the store and expensive impulse purchases when a carton of eggs is all you need.

Shop Smart: According to the Iowa State University Extension website, over half of all grocery purchasing decisions are made at the store. Use these tips to "work the store" to your advantage:

Stick with an organized list.

Eat first. Hungry shoppers overbuy and usually purchase prepared (less healthy) foods.

Shop alone if possible. A partner and/or children tagging along can quickly stray from the list and increase the food bill. However, shopping with kids is a nice way to teach them good shopping habits, so if they come along, set expectations before leaving the house.

Get a grocery store loyalty card.

Shop the perimeter to fill up on fruits and vegetables, protein and dairy.

Look for bargains near the ends of aisles and on the upper and lower shelves. Since items at eye level are more expensive, squat down and rise on your toes as you wander down aisles looking for deals.

Compare unit prices of different product sizes and brands. Unit prices are found on the shelf tags below the food items.

Buy in bulk.

Make your own single-serving snack packs from larger bags of food.

Prepare Food at Home: After shopping, dedicate a little time to organizing food at home. The average American family throws away 14% of its food—almost \$600 every year (ISUE 2010). Minimize waste by planning how to use leftovers in the next day's meals; label and freeze any that are not used up. Store food in see-through containers and arrange them so that the oldest items are in front.

