Healthy Eating on a Student Budget

Many students find healthy eating a challenge. Making healthy food choices on a tight budget can seem impossible. The challenge is complicated by the fact that many students have limited storage space or facilities to prepare food. Other students, out on their own for the first time, find they don’t have a lot of nutrition knowledge or food preparation skills, and the task of preparing meals for one person may seem particularly daunting. Time pressures add to the difficulty; most students find it difficult to make time to prepare meals amid classes, papers, assignments, and exams.

_Healthy Eating on a Budget_ addresses many of these issues by providing tips to stretch the food dollar, low-cost and quick recipe ideas.

**Stretching the Food Dollar:**
**Tips to Cut Food Costs**
- Make a shopping list. Be sure to check what items you have on stock so you’re not tempted to buy extras that you don’t really need.
- Avoid shopping on an empty stomach. Hungry shoppers buy more than they need.
- Shop the bulk food bins. They are often less expensive than packaged foods and allow you to choose the amount you want.
- Weigh the cost and value of purchasing convenience foods. For example, you will save ten cents a glass by purchasing orange juice from concentrate and adding your own water instead of paying someone to add the water for you.
- Store brands and generic products are often less expensive than brand name products, with comparable quality. For example, brand name macaroni & cheese costs twice as much as the generic product.
- Be wary of gimmicks. End-of-aisle displays are not always specials.
- Examine the bottom and top of shelves. High-priced items are often placed at eye level to sell.
- Compare prices by the unit to get the best bargain.
- Avoid buying at convenience stores. You’ll pay extra for the convenience. An apple at the grocery store may cost about half of what it would cost at a convenience store.
- Buy quantities you can readily use or easily store to prevent spoilage and food waste. Share purchasing large quantities with your roommates or a friend.
Home Tips

• Eat breakfast at home or bring food with you on the run. The cost of purchasing a muffin and a coffee every day can add up to $50 or more per month! Breakfast is the most important meal of the day. It provides the energy to refuel your body and mind, increases your intake of fiber, vitamins and minerals, improves memory and performance and helps control appetite and body weight.

To build a balanced breakfast, include foods from at least 3 of the 4 food groups from the USDA Food Pyramid.

http://www.mypyramid.gov

• If storage is a problem, keep non-perishable food items in stock. Canned and dry goods are convenient, nonperishable and can be nutritious. See “Nutritious Pantry Basics for more ideas.

• Check which food products you have in stock and be creative.

• Save by planning ahead and packing nutritious snacks and lunches for the day to provide the constant supply of energy your body needs to run at peak performance. Choose food from the USDA Food Pyramid. If most of your meals and snacks are “other foods” (coffee, soft drinks, donuts, chips) then you’re likely not getting all the nutrients you need.

• Fill plastic drink containers with juice from home instead of buying individual juice boxes.

• Examine how often you eat out. Dining out is more expensive than preparing a meal at home.

• Invite friends to cook a meal together or share pot luck.

USDA Food Pyramid
Steps to a Healthier You

One size doesn’t fit all.
MyPyramid offers personalized eating plans, interactive tools to help you plan and assess your food choices, and advice to help you:

• Make smart choice from every food group
• Find balance between food and physical activity
• Get more nutrition out of your calories
• Stay with your daily calorie needs

USDA Food Pyramid classified into six groups: grain products, vegetables, fruits, oils, milk products, and meat & alternatives.

Each group includes a variety of foods that contains similar nutrients. For example, milk products are good sources of protein and calcium, whereas meat and alternatives are sources of protein, iron and zinc.

The food groups are organized as segments of the pyramid, each segments are different sizes to emphasize how much food we need from each group.

To meet your nutrient requirements and energy needs, choose foods from each of the four groups. Each group provides different key nutrients, so eliminating a food group from your diet results in the elimination of key nutrients and may result in sub-optimal nutrition.

Foods within each food group provide different nutrients in different amounts. For example, oranges and broccoli contain more vitamin C and folate than do apples and bananas. Choosing a variety of foods from all food groups will help to ensure that you

Is it a challenge to make a quick nutritious breakfast before you dash out the door? Here are some ideas:

• cereal, milk and juice
• toast or a bagel with peanut butter and milk
• granola, yogurt and berries
• trail mix made with dried fruit, nuts and cereal
• leftover pizza
• hard boiled or scrambled egg with toast and juice (Scramble 2 eggs in a mug and microwave for 1 minute.)

Snack Attack!
Pack raw veggies or fruit, dried fruit, yogurt, a muffin, dry cereal, bagels, cheese, crackers, hard cooked eggs, rice cakes, leftovers or a sandwich.
obtain the 52 different nutrients our bodies need. Vitamin and mineral supplements provide only approximately 15 different nutrients; therefore we cannot rely on supplements to meet our requirements.

Restricting fat is often the focus when people are trying to improve eating habits. It’s important to be moderate with dietary fat, since too much fat can increase your risk for heart disease, stroke, and certain cancers. However, we do need to include some fat in our diet to maintain good health. Fat is necessary for the absorption of vitamins, adds flavor, and is an important and inexpensive source of energy.

Some types of fats cannot be made by our body and must be provided by our diet. These essential fats are required for healthy skin, reproduction, and brain and eye functioning. Build your diet around vegetables, fruit, legumes and grain products. Choose lower-fat foods more often, but don’t become preoccupied with eliminating fat from your diet. Moderate amounts of butter, margarine, and oils can be used to help make your meals more satisfying.

Each food group contains key nutrients that perform special functions within the body.

**Grain Products:** This group is an important source of carbohydrates (our most important source of energy), fiber, iron, minerals and vitamins. Foods in this group help to energize our bodies and minds and keep our blood and digestive tract healthy. Build your meals around your favorite grain, pasta or rice. Choose whole grain products more often for the fiber, folate, iron and energy they provide.

**Vegetables and Fruit:** These two groups are rich in essential vitamins such as A and C, and folic acid. These vitamins help our bodies use energy and fight infections, are important in growth, and contribute to healthy looking skin, eyes and hair. Choose dark green, bright yellow and orange vegetables and fruit more often for the rich nutrients they provide. Note that whole fruits and vegetables provide greater nutrition than juices.

**Milk Products:** This group is an important source of calcium, which helps to build strong bones and teeth, aids in muscle function and can help with weight regulation. Fluid milk is enriched with vitamin D, a critical nutrient that helps your body to use calcium. Include 2 to 4 servings of milk and milk products every day.

**Meat & Alternatives:** This group is essential for building and repairing muscle and tissue and maintaining healthy blood. Include 2 to 3 servings every day. If you follow a vegetarian style of eating, choose a wide variety of meat alternatives (eggs, beans, lentils or tofu).
Foods that don’t fit into any of the four food groups mentioned above are classified as “other foods”. These include foods that are mostly fats and oils (margarine, butter, oil), foods that are mostly sugar (jam, honey, sugar), high fat &/or high salt snack foods (potato chips, pretzels, pastry), certain beverages (pop, coffee, tea, alcohol) and herbs, spices and condiments. They add to the taste and enjoyment of food. Some of these foods are “everyday foods” and others are “sometimes foods” and can be enjoyed in moderation.

**Nutritious Foods Don’t Have To Be Expensive**

You don’t have to compromise nutrition when finances are tight. Here are some food group-specific tips to stretch your food dollar:

**Saving Money on Grain Products**

**Best Buys:** whole grain rice, macaroni, bread, rolled oats, and hot cereals

- Choose pasta made from whole grain or enriched flour.
- Plain pasta shapes like macaroni and spaghetti may be cheaper than fancy shapes.
- Buy from bakeries at the end of the day for discounts.
- Buy whole grain cereals instead of sugary ones. (Look for less than 5 grams of sugar and at least 2 grams of fiber.) They are more economical and nutritious.
- Avoid buying rice and pasta mixes. They are many times the cost of plain rice and pasta and are usually high in fat and salt.
- Long grain rice is half the cost of minute rice and only takes 15 more minutes to make. For even higher nutrient content, choose brown rice.

**Saving Money on Vegetables & Fruit**

**Best Buys:** apples, bananas, grapefruit, oranges, rhubarb, frozen juices (especially orange), potatoes, cabbage, carrots, plain frozen veggies, and canned tomatoes

- Buy fresh berries in season and freeze to enjoy at a later date.
- Buy fresh produce in amounts you can use before they go bad. Buy 5 carrots or 3 apples if that is all you need. If you buy a bag, split the contents between friends.
- Buy plain, bagged frozen vegetables instead of vegetables that are boxed and packaged with added sauces. They are much less expensive and are usually lower in fat and salt.
- Eat coleslaw more often. Cabbage is cheaper than lettuce and more nutritious.
- Pre-cut your own veggies. Keep them sealed in a container or zipper bag to prevent them from drying out.
- Remember that fresh, frozen, canned or dried fruits and vegetables are all nutritious. Choose which works best for your budget, taste and storage situation.
- Not all “juices” are created equal. Choose a juice that it is labeled 100% fruit juice. Avoid beverages labeled “fruit drink”, “fruit punch” or “fruit beverage”. These products are high in sugar and contain very little fruit juice. The best buy is frozen orange juice concentrate.

**Saving Money on Milk Products**

**Best Buys:** skim milk powder, milk, evaporated milk, processed slices, cheddar cheese, mozzarella, and plain yogurt

- Skim milk powder is inexpensive (approximately half the cost of fluid milk), is easy to store, and is a good source of calcium and protein. Use skim milk powder for cooking and baking in sauces, puddings, casseroles, soups, hot cooked cereal, mashed potatoes, and pasta dishes. Mix 1/3 cup of milk powder plus 1 cup water to reconstitute and use in place of fluid milk.
- Choose “no-name” brand cheeses.
- Substitute evaporated milk for cream.
- Buy plain vanilla yogurt and add your favorite fruit to flavor it yourself.

**Saving Money on Meats & Alternatives**

**Best Buys:** peanut butter, dried/canned beans or lentils, eggs, hamburger, blade or rump roast, canned tuna, and chicken

- Meats can be the most expensive item in the food budget. Buy cheaper cuts of meat and marinate them or cook longer at a lower temperature.
Use dried or canned beans and lentils more often. They are an economical substitute for eat, are lower in fat, and are a good source of fiber.

Plain frozen fish is less expensive than fresh or battered fish.

The following foods can be kept on hand for quick and easy meal solutions. Remember: buy only the foods that you use or have space to store.

**Nutritious Pantry Basics:**
- canned salmon, tuna, chicken
- canned or dried peas, beans, lentils
- canned fruit, dried fruit and raisins
- peanut butter
- canned tomatoes, corn
- pasta, rice and other grains
- skim milk powder
- salt, pepper and other seasonings
- bread, buns, bagels or pitas
- apples, oranges or bananas
- potatoes, carrots, onions and cabbage
- sugar, syrup, jam, oil, vinegar

**Nutritious Refrigerator Basics:**
- eggs
- milk, cheese, yogurt
- margarine

**Nutritious Freezer Basics:**
- frozen fruit juice concentrates (especially orange juice)
- frozen vegetables, berries and rhubarb

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### Compare & Save on Grocery Bag Comparison

**Grocery Bag #1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food</th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whole Wheat Pita</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>$2.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can Pineapple</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>$1.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quick Oatmeal</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>$2.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long Grain Rice</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>$0.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rotelle</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>$1.29</td>
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<tr>
<td>Italian Tomatoes</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>$1.35</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chunk Lite Tuna</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>$0.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broccoli Florets</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>$1.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frozen Concentrate OJ</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>$1.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fresh Chicken Breast</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>$6.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banana</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>$0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baking Potato</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>$1.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apple</td>
<td>0.39</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sweet Onion</td>
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<tr>
<td>Romaine Lettuce</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>$1.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carrots</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>$0.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural Sharp Cheddar</td>
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<td><strong>Total Weight &amp; Cost</strong></td>
<td><strong>16.06 Lbs</strong></td>
<td><strong>$29.85</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total Cost Per Lbs</strong></td>
<td><strong>$1.66</strong></td>
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**Grocery Bag #2**

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<tbody>
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<td>Potato Chips</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yogos Fruit Snacks</td>
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<tr>
<td>Froot Loops Cereals</td>
<td>1.06</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chicken Flavored Rice</td>
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<td>Rotini in Tomato Sauce</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chunk Lite Tuna Snack</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>$1.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French Fries</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>$1.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian Broccoli/Carrots</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>$3.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grilled Chicken Strips</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>$3.79</td>
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<tr>
<td>Heart of Romaine Mix</td>
<td>0.63</td>
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<td>Baby Carrots</td>
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<td>Processed Cheddar</td>
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<td>Suny D</td>
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<td><strong>$38.79</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Cost Per Lbs</strong></td>
<td><strong>$4.79</strong></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Grocery bag #1 contains a greater amount of food and much healthier food choices all for a lower cost. Consider both the cost and the nutritional value when making food choices. This information was prepared Sept 08.