

FOR YOUR INFORMATION



Inspirations, says these numbers can be misleading. “If you’re just comparing calories for calories, you get more calories from potato chips than you do from a potato, but if you follow that line of reasoning, the cheapest way to eat would be to [consume] pure oil because it’s the most calorie-dense food. But that’s not recommended, and that’s not healthful,” Tallmadge says. “While a bag of potato chips has more calories [than a potato], what counts is [nutritional] value. Calories have some value, but if you have calories without nutrients, that’s not value, in my opinion.”

Good Planning = Good Eating

Despite the recent data, there are numerous ways clients can eat nutritious foods without busting their grocery budget. For starters, they can buy seasonal fruits and vegetables, which are much less expensive than those purchased out of season.

“If you’re buying out-of-season fruit that needs to be flown in from the southern hemisphere, often you’ll pay several times more per pound than when buying in-season produce,” says Julie Upton, MS, RD, cofounder of Appetite for Health.

Upton says convenience costs such as this often add to an item’s retail price. Another example is precut or prewashed fruits and vegetables. They cost more than those that must be washed and chopped at home. Nonetheless, Upton says it’s important to weigh the convenience cost against the cost of not eating produce at all. If the choice comes down to eating a fruit or vegetable that’s ready to eat out of the bag vs. not buying it because of the extra work it takes to prepare it, the convenience cost over time will be much less than the potential medical costs that may result from not eating enough fruits and vegetables.

When considering restaurant take-out and fast-food meals, the convenience costs are even greater. Preparing meals at home is much less expensive. But for clients with busy lives or few people for whom to cook, preparing meals at home can seem like a great deal of work for a small benefit. To ease their burden and help them save money, dietitians can encourage clients to cook in batches and freeze meal portions to reduce time in the kitchen. Preplanning weekly meals is another cost-cutting strategy.

“Lack of planning often can be a bigger obstacle to healthful eating than lack of preparation time. How often do you come home and have no idea what to make for dinner and have nothing in the house?” says Karen Ansel, RD, a spokes-

EAT HEALTHFULLY ON A BUDGET

Dietitians Offer Strategies to Help Struggling Clients

By David Yeager

With the economy still in the doldrums and the unemployment rate hovering around 8%, nearly everyone is looking to save a few dollars these days. And one way consumers are pinching pennies is by skimping on nutritious food.

In July 2011, a Pollock Communications survey of 1,000 Americans found that more than 57% of respondents cited cost as a significant barrier to eating a more healthful diet. Judging from this data, one can infer that most people view eating healthful food as a luxury—and they may have good reason to believe so.

An August 2011 study from the University of Washington found that following the FDA’s MyPlate guidelines can add as much as \$380 a year—more than \$1 a day—to the average consumer’s grocery bill. Perhaps more surprising is that the study also found that for every 1% increase in calories from fat and sugar, consumers’ food costs declined significantly. These results don’t help dietitians convince clients that health isn’t a function of wealth.

Katherine Tallmadge, MA, RD, a spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (the Academy) and author of *Diet Simple: 195 Mental Tricks, Substitutions, Habits &*

person for the Academy and coauthor of *The Baby and Toddler Cookbook: Fresh, Homemade Foods for a Healthy Start*. "Creating a weekly meal plan and shopping list makes it easy to fill your fridge, freezer, and pantry with foods that you can make a meal out of in a hurry."

Ansel recommends clients check grocery store circulars for deals and to plan meals around what's on sale. Making a shopping list has the added benefit of limiting impulse purchases, as does shopping after a meal when you're full rather than before a meal when you're hungry. Clients can stock up on nonperishable items, such as pasta, beans, and frozen vegetables, when they're on sale to reduce costs over time and buy dried goods such as grains in bulk, which is much less expensive than buying prepackaged varieties.

"I can go to the bulk bin and buy rolled oats for \$1.29 a pound, and that gives me my oatmeal breakfast for a long time," Tallmudge says. "That's many, many oatmeal breakfasts for pennies."

Upton adds that comparing the unit prices of items—how much something costs per pound or per 100 units—helps clients compare apples to apples, figuratively speaking. She also says less expensive store brands often are similar in quality to name brands. Becoming aware of product placement on store shelves is another cost-cutting strategy. Typically, less costly items are placed higher and lower on store shelves, while premium-priced items usually are positioned at eye level.

Moreover, protein often is the most expensive part of the food budget, but clients can meet their protein requirements without buying high-end items such as fresh salmon and premium cuts of beef. Canned fish, eggs, beans, and peanut butter are excellent sources of protein, and they're inexpensive. Suggesting that clients eat one or two meatless meals per week can reduce food costs considerably.

With a little planning and research, anyone can stretch their grocery budget while maintaining a well-balanced, healthful diet. Upton says dietitians can be a valuable resource for clients by showing them how to get the most from their food dollars without sacrificing nutrition. She says writing articles for local newspapers, sharing recipes and tips with clients, and organizing supermarket tours are effective ways to achieve this goal.

"Educating consumers, showing them how it can be done, giving them recipes that demonstrate they can have a great-tasting, healthful meal on a budget. I think that's what dietitians are all about: educating people and dispelling these myths that are so prevalent in nutrition," Upton says. "I can see things like this being a great service to consumers who are really struggling in this tough economy."

— David Yeager is a freelance writer and editor based in Royersford, Pennsylvania.

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