

Healthy Eating on a Budget:

Practical Strategies for Eating Well in a Tough Economy



by Chris Fraser

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As health-care professionals and wound specialists, we may feel limited in our interventions with a client because of his or her financial challenges. Inadequate funding may be a significant barrier to accessing optimal equipment, care and services. Similarly, we may encounter financial barriers when recommending enhanced nutrient intake to our clients.

Consuming a variety of foods from each food group is essential in order to obtain the full range of nutrients—protein, carbohydrates, fats, vitamins and minerals—required for health and healing.

Below are some practical strategies, cost-saving tips and “best-value” foods within each food group to help our clients achieve good nutrition on a budget.

Meat and Meat Alternatives

This food group provides the best sources of protein, iron and zinc, all essential nutrients for wound prevention and healing, as well as many other essential vitamins and minerals.

Best value

The best-value meat and meat alternatives are dried/canned beans and lentils; peanut butter; eggs; ground beef and other ground meats (regular ground beef is the best buy, but be sure to drain the fat); canned tuna; utility-grade chicken that may be missing a leg or a wing but is no less nutritious; and blade, rump roasts, pot roasts or stewing beef.

Cost-saving tips

- Purchase less expensive cuts of meat and marinate them and/or cook them for longer in water, broth,

tomato juice or other liquids.

- Cold cuts purchased at the delicatessen counter are less expensive than the pre-packaged varieties.
- Wieners are cheap, but provide only half the protein and iron of other meats.
- Purchase a whole chicken and cook it whole or cut it up yourself.
- Flaked tuna is more affordable than chunk tuna; solid tuna tends to be more expensive.
- Plain frozen fish is less expensive than fresh or battered fish.
- Cook meatless meals more often using dried or canned beans (such as kidney beans and beans in tomato sauce) and lentils; they are a high-protein, economical substitute for meat. They are also cholesterol-free and contain nutrients that are heart-healthy and help to moderate blood-sugar levels.

Consider this comparison: a three-ounce cooked chicken breast OR one and a half cups of canned beans in tomato sauce OR one and a half cups of kidney beans OR half a cup of canned tuna = approximately 21 grams of protein.

Non-meat sources of iron are absorbed better by the body when they are eaten at the same time as food or drinks that contain vitamin C (found in fruits and vegetables and their juices) or when cooked in cast-iron cookware.

Milk Products

Milk and milk products are sources of high-quality protein as well as calcium, vitamin D and many other essential vitamins and minerals. If recommended, higher-fat varieties (such as whole milk and yogurts

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with at least 3 per cent fat) provide extra calories that will spare protein in the diet so that it is available for functions that only protein can do, such as wound healing and strengthening the immune system.

Best value

The best-value milk products are skim-milk powder, evaporated milk, processed cheese slices, cheddar and mozzarella cheeses, plain yogurt and fluid milk.

Cost-saving tips

- Choose store-brand cheeses and yogurts.
- Mild or medium cheese is less expensive than old cheese.
- Purchase store-wrapped cheeses to save money.
- Substitute evaporated 2% milk for cream.
- Bags of milk tend to be less expensive than cartons.
- Buy plain yogurt and add your own fresh, frozen or canned fruits and high-fibre cereals. Larger containers are cheaper per serving than the single-serving sizes.
- Skim-milk powder is almost half the cost of fluid milk. It stores well and is a good source of calcium and protein. Mix one-third of a cup (75 mL) of skim-milk powder into one cup (250 mL) of water to replace fluid milk purchased in cartons or bags. Or consider mixing one cup (250 mL) of skim-milk powder into one litre of fluid milk to make a high-protein milk. Skim-milk powder can be added to yogurt, puddings, casseroles, cream soups, hot cereals, mashed potatoes, pasta dishes and sauces and can be included with other dry ingredients when baking to boost the protein content of these foods. Two tablespoons (30 mL) of skim-milk powder provide five grams of protein.

Note: skim-milk powder contains natural carbohydrates (sugar), which may impact blood-sugar levels in people with diabetes.

Vegetables and Fruits

Vegetables and fruits are healthy sources of the energy (calories) needed for skin health and healing. They also provide essential nutrients such as vitamin C, beta carotene (which is converted to vitamin A in the body) and folic acid. Furthermore, they provide fibre and nutrients that contribute to bowel health, cardiovascular disease risk reduction and the moderation of blood glucose levels.

Best value

The best-value fruits and vegetables are apples, bananas, grapefruits, oranges, cabbage, potatoes, carrots, turnips, rhubarb, plain frozen vegetables, canned tomatoes and frozen 100% juices (especially orange juice).

Cost-saving tips

- Buy locally grown fresh fruit and vegetables when they are in season.
- Buying in bulk saves money and allows extra to freeze.
- If you are not going to freeze or share, buy only the amount of fresh fruit and vegetables that can be used before they spoil.
- Wash and cut fruit and vegetables yourself; pre-washed, cut and packaged products are far more expensive.
- Buying apples, oranges and potatoes in pre-packaged bags is cheaper than buying them individually.
- Frozen and canned fruits and vegetables are your best choices out of season; just remember that canned vegetables tend to be high in salt, and fruit canned in syrup is higher in sugar than fruit canned in juice or water.
- The best-value frozen vegetables are peas, corn, green beans, mixed vegetables and spinach.
- Purchase plain frozen vegetables, which are far more affordable and lower in fat and salt than varieties that are frozen with sauces added.
- Cabbage is less expensive and more nutritious than lettuce.

Buying frozen juice from concentrate and adding water, rather than purchasing the pre-mixed juice from concentrate, can save up to 10 cents per glass. Avoid "fruit drinks," "fruit punches" and "fruit beverages," which are high in sugar, low in nutrients and may cost more. Small juice boxes are the least economical way to buy juice.

Grain Products

Grain products such as breads, cereals, pasta and rice are great sources of carbohydrates, our body's preferred source of energy, as well as of fibre, iron, vitamins and minerals. Whole-grain products provide more nutrition than "wholewheat" products; white breads, rice and pasta are more processed and less nutritious than the whole-grain or brown varieties.

Best value

The best-value grain products are whole-grain rice, macaroni, bread, rolled oats and hot cereals.

Cost-saving tips

- Plain rice and pasta, especially store brands, are far less expensive than canned or frozen rice and pasta mixes, which are also often higher in fat and salt.
- Plain pasta shapes such as macaroni and spaghetti can be less expensive than other shapes.
- Purchase extra plain rice and pasta when they are on special offer. They can be stored for long periods of time in a cool dry place.
- Purchase bread and baked goods that are labelled “day-old,” which are available at discounted prices. Freeze bread and take it out of the freezer as you need it; it stays fresh in the freezer (bread can be frozen for up to two months) and will prevent the need to throw out mouldy bread.
- The most economical and nutritious cereals are the whole-grain and plain varieties; pre-sweetened, high-sugar cereals provide less nutrition and cost more.
- Cereals that you cook (e.g., oats) are less expensive than ready-to-eat cereals.
- Long-grain rice is half the price of minute rice and takes just a few minutes longer to cook.

Other Money-saving Hints

- Purchase staple foods from bulk-food stores or the bulk bins in the grocery store.
- Clip coupons for foods that you regularly buy.
- Bargains at grocery stores are often found on the top and bottom shelves.
- Never throw out leftovers. They can be eaten the next day or used in mixed dishes such as casseroles, stews and rice and pasta dishes.
- Take your lunch to work rather than buying it; even buying a large coffee and a muffin each day can cost around \$50 per month!
- The money spent on “fast food”, “pick-up” and “delivery” meals buys a much larger volume and variety of more nutritious foods and beverages.
- Pack lunches and snacks in reusable containers rather than baggies or plastic wrap, which add to the grocery bill.
- Consider container gardening during the spring and summer; fresh vegetables can be grown in planter pots or plastic bins on apartment balconies.
- Look in the phone book or online for “collective kitchens” in your area; members contribute a small fee per family member for ingredients that are made into meals and shared among the participants.

Collective or community kitchens provide social environments and nutritious, economical meals.

- Store-brand liquid nutrition supplements and meal replacements are nutritionally comparable but less expensive than name-brand supplements.
- Some Meals-on-Wheels programs offer subsidized meal plans for clients who qualify.

Funding programs may be available that we can assist our clients to access. For example, in the province of Ontario clients can apply to the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP). ODSP members may qualify for additional monthly funds under the “Special Diets Application” program. Awareness of provincial/territorial or other financial assistance programs adds to our expertise and the value of our holistic interventions for our clients. ☺

References/Resources

Nutrition Matters. Best Buys in the Four Food Groups. Middlesex-London Health Unit, London, Ontario. Adapted from material produced by Public Health Nutritionists of the Ottawa-Carlton Health Department. Distributed by Nutrition Services, Middlesex-London Health Unit, London, Ontario. (Not dated.)

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