

# Nutrition News

Department of Human Nutrition



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## Eating Well while Trimming Food Costs

Amid rising prices, consumers can trim food costs, yet eat well, a Kansas State University Research and Extension food and nutrition specialist said.

Eating out occasionally, rather than regularly, can cut food costs and also yield health benefits, said Mary Meck Higgins, an Associate Professor of Human Nutrition in the College of Human Ecology at K-State. Food prepared at home is generally healthier, because the consumer can choose the foods and decide how they are prepared.

To save on groceries, shop regularly and with a list to reduce the need for extra trips to the store, Higgins said. She recommends shopping less frequently and using perishable foods within two to three days. Beyond that, shoppers can fill in with canned or frozen foods prior to the next shopping trip.

“Shoppers who return to the store for one or two items rarely leave with just one or

two items,” Higgins said. “Extra items add extra costs.”

“Making a shopping list that follows the general layout of the store can reduce the amount of time a shopper will spend retracing his or her steps and the temptation to pick up extra items along the way,” she said. Using a list that follows the store layout also can save time.

Whether a supermarket or grocery section, the least expensive items – seasonal fruits and vegetables, dairy products, grain products, and lean meats, poultry and fish – often are arranged around the outer edges, or perimeter, of the store, Higgins said. Promotional items may be placed at the end of the aisles, but don’t assume that such items are sale priced. More expensive processed foods are typically displayed in center aisles.

Processing adds to food cost and consumers often can realize a savings if they are willing to do some of the

preparation themselves, she said. For example, the cost for a block of cheese is typically less than the cost for the same amount of grated cheese. Investing in an inexpensive box grater can yield savings.

Packaging also will add to the cost, said Higgins, who noted that breakfast cereal packaged in a waxed paper or cellophane bag often will be less expensive than similar products offered in a gimmicky box.

Shelf placement can be an indicator of price, said Higgins, explaining that the most expensive items often will be within easy reach, in the shoulder-to-knee range. Less expensive items often are placed on a higher shelf that can be more difficult to reach or on a lower shelf where such products may be overlooked.

Checking the cost-per-serving or unit price posted on the edge of the store shelf where the product is displayed is recommended,

said Higgins, who typically advises consumers to choose the lowest cost per serving. For a single or small family, buying a supersized package of a seldom-used item may not yield a savings, though.

“Buy realistic quantities so as not to waste food, time and money,” said Higgins, who offered these additional shopping and money-saving tips:

- Choose seasonal fresh fruits and vegetables offered at a lower price when supplies are abundant. Also, shop at a local farmers’ market for locally-grown foods that are fresh, and comparable in price – or less expensive.
- Use perishable foods within two to three days, or freeze for future meals.
- Check use-by dates before buying to ensure fresh products and flavor and curb waste.
- Plan leftovers. When cooking, make a larger recipe that will yield extra servings that can be frozen for future meals when time is short.
- Compare costs for national brand products with the cost for a generic or store brand that may be produced at the same facility.
- Choose frozen fruit juice concentrates and re-constitute them as needed, rather than buying bottled versions that typically cost more.
- Keep a running list of prices for favorite items, and stock up during sales.
- Buy often-used items in bulk to save on packaging costs. If desired, measure out single servings of snacks and place them in reusable containers, rather than purchase more costly pre-packaged single servings or relying on vending machines.
- Look for reduced-price foods that will work for upcoming meals. Ground beef may, for example, be reduced in price, but will need to be cooked the same or next day or frozen for future meals.
- Ask for a rain check to buy sale items (that are sold out) later at the same low price.
- Use coupons to save on regularly-used products, but only after comparing prices. Coupons do not always guarantee a savings.
- Marinate and/or slow-cook in moist heat less tender (and usually less costly) cuts of meat for a savings – and a flavorful meal.
- Buy foods that provide the most grams of protein per dollar, such as bagged dried beans, lentils and peas, dry milk powder, canned dry beans, canned tuna, frozen dry beans and peanut butter. These currently cost less than 10 cents for 6-8 grams of protein.
- Check recommended portions versus serving size. Trimming overly-generous portions can help reduce excess body weight – and food costs.
- Eat before shopping to reduce impulse purchases.

People of all ages with limited resources may be eligible for food assistance, said Higgins. She recommended calling a toll-free national number – 800-221-5689. The United States Department of Agriculture Food Stamp Information line can link consumers with resources to buy foods for a healthy diet.

More information on food, food safety, nutrition, health and preparing low-cost meals is available at county and district K-State Research and Extension offices and on its Web sites: [www.oznet.ksu.edu](http://www.oznet.ksu.edu) and [www.oznet.ksu.edu/humannutrition](http://www.oznet.ksu.edu/humannutrition) and [www.oznet.ksu.edu/foodsafety](http://www.oznet.ksu.edu/foodsafety).

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For more information about healthy eating, contact your local extension office.

The Food Assistance Program can help people of all ages with low income buy nutritious foods for a better diet.

To find out more, call toll-free 1-888-369-4777.

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