



ASK THE DIETITIAN

Nutrition on a Budget

Q. My family and I eat on-the-run often, what are the healthiest choices at a reasonable price?

A. When people eat on-the-go they usually choose quick-serve restaurants or convenience stores. Quick-serve restaurants can be inexpensive and do include some healthy menu choices. When ordering look for items such as grilled chicken sandwiches, salads with grilled chicken or shrimp and low-fat dressing, or low-fat wraps. Also replace your fries with a baked potato, fruit, or yogurt and choose beverages that are unsweetened. To save more money order a kid's portion or split a meal. Convenience stores also offer some healthy options but can be more expensive. To save money you can also keep homemade snacks like trail mix in your car or pack a healthy lunch if you know you will be gone for awhile.

Q. I'd like to purchase more fruits and vegetables but they are usually expensive, how can I save on these foods?

A. The best way to save on produce is to buy seasonal fruits and vegetables, especially those that are locally grown and did not have to travel a long distance. They will be cheaper and fresher than foods that are not in season. Buying seasonal can help you save money and keep you enticed by mixing things up. For fall try pomegranates, persimmons, or acorn squash. Choose apricots, mangos, or collard greens in spring. In summer select blueberries, kiwis, and summer squash. Lastly, in winter go for cauliflower, mushrooms, and sweet potatoes. You can also look for fruit that has been reduced or on sale. They are usually ripe or may have a small blemish but still taste good. You can also check out your local farmer's market for even more deals on fresh produce. Many have an end of the day sale that will add up to big savings. Lastly, don't be afraid to buy canned or frozen fruits and vegetables. They are often cheaper and have about the same nutrients as fresh. Be sure that the fruit is unsweetened and vegetables do not contain any added salt or sauces.

Q. Is the grocery store the best place to buy all your groceries?

A. While you can find many deals at typical grocery stores there are other places you can look. Packaged foods like cereals and granola bars may be cheaper at super centers. Items that you use often or foods that are nonperishable can be bought in bulk at food warehouses. Buying in bulk can be a great savings strategy. Look for produce and even fresh baked goods at your local farmer's market. Health food stores may carry natural or organic foods for less than the grocery store. Make a trip to the different food stores in your area and see where you find the best deals for various items.

Our dietitians receive hundreds of questions each year about a wide variety of nutrition topics. Their timely and trustworthy insights and ideas can help you and your family live healthier lives. Since everyone's health history and nutritional needs are so different, please make sure that you talk with your own doctor and registered dietitian to get advice about the diet and exercise plan that's right for you.



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Q. I have heard that meat alternatives are less expensive than the real thing, how do I use them in my meals?

A. Items like beans, tofu, and textured vegetable protein can be used to replace meat in almost any dish and cost less than meat. Beans and legumes are great in soups, burritos, and casseroles. Tofu itself does not have much flavor but it acts like a sponge and soaks up the flavor of the foods it is being cooked with. Tofu can be used in chilies, stir-frys, soups, or even made into burgers. Textured vegetable protein (TVP) or textured soy protein is very inexpensive and is made from soy flour. It is high in protein and low in fat. TVP usually comes as dried flakes or 'vegetarian meat' and you can use it in place of some or all the meat in a dish like lasagna, meatballs, tacos, or chili. You can reap the savings as well as the health benefits by making these substitutions in your cooking.

Q. I try to avoid buying extra snacks but somehow they always end up in my cart, any advice that will help me only get what I need?

A. Most importantly always shop from a list and do not buy anything that isn't on your list. Also be sure to shop the perimeter of the grocery store first and only go down the middle aisles for necessary items. The perimeter is where you will find the healthiest foods such as fresh fruits and vegetables, low-fat dairy products, and lean meats. Another way to stay within your budget is to pay with cash when possible. You can save by purchasing ingredients to make your own snacks. Buy nuts and dried fruit and make your own trail mix or make your own protein bars with peanut butter, oats, and honey.

Q. Are locally grown foods really healthy?

A. Because locally grown fruits and vegetables are usually recently harvested, fresh not processed and tend to be at the peak of ripeness, they tend to have higher amounts of nutrients than produce that have traveled a long distance. Locally grown foods usually cost less and can be found at your supermarket, local farmer's market, and even roadside stands. Be sure to check them all out and see where the best deals are and make locally grown produce a nutritious addition to your healthy lifestyle.

Q. How can I find quality meats that don't cost a fortune?

A. To save on meats look for select or choice grade rather than prime. Choice cuts not only cost less, they are also lower in fat. If you are using the meat for soups, stews, or casseroles choose tougher cuts. Look for daily or weekly specials at your supermarket and when you find a healthy bargain, buy in bulk and freeze. Rather than buying packaged or deli lunch meat, buy fresh chicken, ham, or turkey breast and cut into slices and freeze what you don't use. You can also save by buying a whole rotisserie chicken and using the leftovers for a soup or casserole.

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Q. To save money I want to start my own garden, which foods are easiest to grow and maintain?

A. Some of the easiest vegetables to grow which do not require a lot of maintenance include tomatoes, carrots, peppers, squash, cucumbers, strawberries, and melons. All you need to do is plant appropriately and water regularly. Herbs are also fairly easy to grow. Starting your own garden is a great way to save money, and get the freshest organic produce. For more information about growing a garden, visit <http://home.howstuffworks.com/starting-a-vegetable-garden.htm>.

Q. I would like to save some money on my grocery bill, but do not want to give up quality to buy store brands, is there a difference between brand names and generic?

A. Usually the big difference between the two is cost. The next time you shop compare the labels between a brand name and a store brand. You will probably find that many of them have the same ingredients and nutrition content, so try out store brands of different items and see which ones are worth the switch.

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