Healthy Low-Cost Eating & Shopping

As we age, nutrition remains an important part of our lives. Studies have shown that a healthful diet in our later years helps to both reduce the risk of disease such as heart disease, diabetes and osteoporosis, as well as manage the signs and symptoms of diseases. Improper nutrition can lead to problems recovering from an illness, increase in health care costs, higher incidence of nursing home admission and a poorer quality of life.

However, some “healthy” food choices like fresh fruit or chicken are often more costly, leading seniors to buy less expensive, less nutritious foods. So how can we make healthy food choices while on a budget?

Healthy Low-Cost Eating

- Keep frozen and canned produce on hand, look for “no salt” or “no sugar” added.
- Use healthful spices like cinnamon on plain oatmeal or rosemary on fish.
- Try different combinations: crunchy cereal sprinkled on yogurt, salsa added to a scrambled egg, roasted chicken with sliced peaches, grapes or nuts in a leafy salad.
- Make a large amount of food and freeze small individual portions creating a “frozen dinner” for another meal - don’t forget to label and date the container.
- Baking, grilling and broiling are healthier cooking methods than frying.
- Use a crock-pot for easy preparation and freeze the leftovers to avoid throwing away food - try stew meat, frozen vegetables and seasoning.
- Consider substitutions: a low fat frozen fudge bar for ice cream, popcorn for potato chips, non-fat yogurt on a baked potato instead of sour cream.
- Changing recipes: applesauce for oil in brownie recipes, firm tofu instead of chicken in a stir-fry, replace one egg with 2 egg whites when baking.
- Snack ideas: dip pretzels into hummus, enjoy cottage cheese and fruit, spread peanut butter on celery, add an almond to the center of a dried plum or try soy nuts.

MORE: fruits, vegetables, foods high in fiber and calcium-rich foods
LESS: foods high in sodium, saturated fat, sugar and cholesterol
AVOID: trans fats

References:


EN’s Advice on How to Spice Up Your Food and Health, Diane Welland, MS, RD. Environmental Nutrition, July 2004, pg. 2.

4 weeks of Fresh Snack Ideas, Catherine D. Johnson, PhD, RD. Ensure Health Connection, August 2003, pg. 8.


*Brand names are used for illustration purposes only and do not constitute an endorsement by Cooperative Extension.

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Healthy Low-Cost Shopping

- Clip coupons, look for the store’s weekly specials or join the store “reward” program to save money.
- Compare prices and cost per serving (unit); take a calculator!
- Shop around: Wal-Mart will accept all store sale ads and coupons, while pharmacy stores like Walgreens and dollar stores often offer deals on non-perishables.

- Always shop with a food list to avoid impulse buying of items you might not really need. Try to shop when you are not hungry.
- Consider buying generic or store brands; usually they have the same nutritional value.
- Buy certain items in bulk, only if you will use them, like apples, potatoes and paper goods.
- Try to avoid buying convenience or pre-made foods, which can be more costly.
- Organic foods will be pricier so if you want to spend the extra money, focus on peaches, strawberries, apples, spinach, celery, pears, bell peppers, raspberries, nectarines and potatoes as they are often the most contaminated with pesticides.
- Get fresh produce in season, strawberries in May and cucumbers in August.
- Canned and frozen produce is economical, convenient and nutritious.
- Higher fat ground meat is less expensive, drain off the excess fat to make it more healthful.
- Watch for special pricing on meat, chicken and fish; frozen fish fillets and whole chicken fryers are good choices.
- Save with day-old bakery items and use immediately or freeze.
- Common variety, block cheese like cheddar or Monterey jack will offer the best value.
- Plain oatmeal in a large container costs less than the single serve flavored varieties.
- Buy plain soups that cost less and add frozen vegetables to them.

Can’t chew? Try other foods like applesauce, cooked cereals, eggs or beans.
Can’t shop? Ask a friend for help, try store delivery or use the store scooter.
Can’t cook? Use the microwave or try a senior center meals program.
No appetite? Eat with friends, try spices or herbs, talk to your doctor.
Short on money? See about eligibility at Meals on Wheels or Food Stamps.

Understanding the Food Label

The “Nutrition Facts” on the food label can help you easily make smart food choices.

- Always check the serving size first as this will help you evaluate the nutritional and economical value. Don’t forget to check calories too (400 calories/serving is high).
- Use the food label and ingredient list to determine if the food has an ingredient you are trying to avoid, like trans fat, or one you want to include, like fiber from a whole grain source.

Nutrition Facts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Serving Size</th>
<th>1 cup (228g)</th>
<th>Servings Per Container</th>
<th>2</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amount Per Serving</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calories</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>Calories from Fat</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Daily Value*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Fat</td>
<td>12g</td>
<td>18%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saturated Fat</td>
<td>3g</td>
<td>15%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trans Fat</td>
<td>0g</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cholesterol</td>
<td>30mg</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sodium</td>
<td>470mg</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Carbohydrate</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dietary Fiber</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sugars</td>
<td>5g</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protein</td>
<td>5g</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vitamin A</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vitamin C</td>
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<td>2%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calcium</td>
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<td>20%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iron</td>
<td></td>
<td>7%</td>
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</tr>
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</table>

* Percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000 calorie diet. Your Daily Values may be higher or lower depending on your calorie needs.

Using the Quick Guide and the Macaroni and Cheese label:

- Is this food high in sodium? YES
- Is this a good source of fiber? NO

A Healthy Low-Cost Favorite...Beans!

Beans are high in protein and fiber, low-fat, inexpensive and easy to prepare. They can be purchased dry, canned or frozen. Cooked beans can be stored safely in air tight containers in the refrigerator (at least 4 days) or freezer (up to 1 year). Beans contain sugars that sometimes cause stomach gas. Always soak, then rinse dry beans prior to cooking to reduce these sugars. Rinsing canned beans will do the same, as well as reduce the sodium. Also, gradually introduce beans into your diet. For more serious symptoms try an anti-gas aid like Beano®. Beans come in many varieties and can be used in soups, salads, casseroles, stews, meatballs and meatloaf as a side dish and in many Mexican food recipes like tacos, burritos, enchiladas or tostadas.