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G90-1008 Making the Most of Your Food Dollars (Revised March 1996)

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Making the Most of Your Food Dollars

This NebGuide describes strategies for providing good nutrition economically.

Linda Boeckner, Extension Nutrition Specialist

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Are you spending more of your family budget on food these days? Want to find ways to make your food dollar go further yet provide enjoyable meals? One way is to educate family members in making wise decisions about menu planning, food buying and cooking.

A varied diet of colorful, wholesome foods that you and your family will eat and like is important. There is no need to leave out all favorite foods to cut costs. Use the best buying practices to get the type of food you need. If including favorite foods results in high cost meals, serve them in smaller portions or less frequently. Money can be saved by serving less costly meals on other days.

New taste experiences are needed, too. We live in a changing world. The family that experiments with new foods now can take advantage of best buys in the future. Plan to introduce new foods or recipes at meals when other familiar or favorite foods are also included.

Prevent Nutrition Problems

It's less expensive to prevent nutrition problems than to treat them. The benefits of good nutrition may include better health, fewer absent days from work or school, or lower doctor and dental bills. Avoid the following nutrition concerns found in modern society:

Too few fruits and vegetables can lead to shortages in vitamin and mineral intakes. Antioxidant

vitamins and phytochemicals are abundant when a variety of fruits and vegetables are eaten. Antioxidant vitamins and phytochemicals may be protective against chronic diseases such as heart disease and cancer. Fruits and vegetables are also high in fiber and low in fat -- a very convenient "fast" food. Choose dark green and leafy vegetables, and deep yellow vegetables and fruits for their carotene and vitamin A values. Citrus fruits, melons and berries are excellent sources of vitamin C. A minimum of five total servings of fruits and vegetables are recommended each day.

Too few milk products result in low calcium intakes that eventually could contribute to osteoporosis, a brittle bone disease. Other sources of calcium include dark green, leafy vegetables such as collard, turnip, and mustard greens and broccoli, dry beans and peas, and bony fish such as sardines. Children, teens, and pregnant or breast feeding women will need at least three servings of milk products daily; others should have from two to three daily servings.

No breakfast can cause poor concentration at school or work which interferes with learning and can lead to mid-morning energy slumps. Typical morning foods are rich in starches and give us an energy boost to start our days.

Too much fat adds extra calories leading to overweight, and increases chronic disease risk. Read nutrition labels to determine the fat in the foods you eat.

Too much sugar may contribute to dental problems and excess calories that lead to overweight. Cut down on concentrated sweets.

Shopping for Food

The first step in shopping for foods is to do some planning. Think through the foods you will need for several days and make a list. To save shopping time, arrange your grocery list according to location in the store where you usually shop.

Compare supermarkets to find one most economically suited to your shopping needs. Food cooperatives, super "warehouse" stores and independent stores may or may not meet your needs. Remember that non-food items can be a significant part of your shopping bill. Some non-food items may be less expensive if purchased at other discount stores. Check costs in your area to determine the best place to shop for your non-food items.

Check food advertisements and compare prices. It's a good idea to be familiar with more than one convenient shopping center so that you'll have some shopping options. For store specials, consider buying an extra supply in reasonable amounts to save money over a period of time.

Clip and use coupons only for food items that you usually buy. Using coupons for items that aren't normally in your budget can actually increase your food budget.

Develop a list of standard food items and staples that are always used at your house. Each week you can quickly check if these items are available or need to be restocked. Also, if the items go on sale you can more easily take advantage of the bargain.

Food equivalents to help in shopping

Apples	1 pound = 3-4 medium
Bananas	1 pound = 3 medium
Beans, dry	1 pound = 2 1/2 cup dry = 5 1/2 to 6 cups cooked
Bread	1 pound = 15 to 18 slices
Bread crumbs	8 ounces = 2 1/4 cups
Butter or margarine	1 pound = 2 cups
Carrots	1 pound = 3 cups sliced
Cheese, yellow	1 pound = 4 cups grated
Cottage cheese	1 pound = 2 cups
Cocoa	1 pound = 4 cups
Coffee, ground	1 lb = 40 cups liquid
Coffee, instant	6 ounces = 90 cups liquid
Corn, canned	16 oz can = 1 3/4 cups, drained
Corn, frozen	10 ounces = 1 1/2 cups cooked, drained
Cornstarch	1 pound = 3 1/2 cups
Graham crackers	1 pound = 60 square crackers
Flour, white	1 pound = 4 cups
Flour, whole wheat	1 pound = 3 3/4 cups
Macaroni	1 pound = 4 cups raw = 9 cups cooked
Noodles	1 pound = 6 cups raw = 9 cups cooked
Peas, green, canned	16 oz can = 1 3/4 cups, drained
Peas, frozen	10 ounces = 1 3/4 cups cooked, drained
Potatoes, white	1 pound = 3-4 medium
Rice, regular	1 pound = 2 cups uncooked = 8 cups cooked
Rice, precooked	7 ounces = 2 cups uncooked = 3 3/4 cups cooked
Sugar, brown	1 pound = 2 cups packed
Sugar, granulated	1 pound = 2 cups
Sugar, powdered	1 pound = 3 cups

As you shop consider these tips:

- Plan shopping trips when you are not too hungry, tired or rushed. You will do a better job at comparing prices and getting the best buys when you choose your best shopping time rather than leaving shopping to the last minute.
- Shop alone or with a wise food shopper, if possible.

- Compare unit pricing. Large packages are often cheaper than smaller container sizes--but not necessarily. If the large size is more economical but your use of the product will lead to spoilage or storage problems, the larger size may not be for you.
- Check the price difference between nationally known brands of foods and store brands. In breakfast cereals alone there can be a great difference. For example, an 18-ounce box of nationally known breakfast cereal can easily cost \$4.50, which equates to 25 cents per serving of breakfast cereal. Store brands may cost \$2.25 for a 20-ounce package or 11 1/4 cents per serving. The difference is mostly in the packaging of the product with little nutritional difference between the two items.
- Recognize advertising gimmicks. Placement of food and other items on easy-to-reach shelves, in the aisles, and at the checkout counter encourages shoppers to pick them up and buy them even if prices are high.
- Check for "open dating" to determine freshness. It's most helpful when you are buying foods that can spoil easily such as fresh meats, poultry, fish, dairy products and bakery items. There are four basic types of "open dating":
 - **Sell by** dates tell you the last date the item should be sold from the store.
 - **Best if used by** is often used on fresh bakery items to tell you when they are at maximum freshness. If you buy bakery items after this date, look for a reduced price and check for signs of spoilage. Older bakery products which have lost their freshness can still be used in casseroles and other food items.
 - **Expiration** or **Use by** dates are found on products to indicate when active ingredients will still be good, such as yeast. It's best not to purchase products after their expiration or "use by" dates.
 - **Pack** dates indicate when a food processor has packaged the food. These dates are typically found on canned or packaged foods with a longer shelf life. Look for items with the most recent pack date to insure best food quality.
- Read the ingredient and nutrition labels to match nutritional needs with food budget needs.
- Canned products of lower quality work well in casseroles and other mixed dishes.
- Shop to protect food quality and safety by picking up frozen foods, dairy and meats toward the end of your shopping trip. Pack frozen foods and meats in insulated bags. Get foods home and in freezer or refrigerator storage as soon as possible.

Are Convenience Foods for You?

Convenience foods can make our lives a little easier but it's a good idea to check whether time saved is worth the cost. It's also important to know that it isn't always less expensive to make recipes from scratch. For example, frozen fruit juices are a convenience item and will be cheaper than getting juice from squeezing fresh fruits. Baking mixes "on sale" are often cheaper than similar items made from scratch--especially if they have expensive ingredients such as nuts or special flavorings.

When it comes to convenience foods, consider your time, product cost, and uses in your family situation carefully. Here are some general rules:

- Meats or poultry cut in pieces or slices usually cost more than large cuts of meats or whole chickens.
- Frozen entrees or main dishes (breaded chicken, TV dinners, burritos, pizzas, pot pies and so forth) typically are more costly than the do-it-yourself variety. Also check nutritional content and make sure it meets your needs. When these items are on sale, however, they may become the best buy.
- Plain, frozen vegetables are better buys than frozen vegetables packed with sauces. Purchase resealable frozen vegetables in larger quantities so that you can use only the amount needed for one meal. Depending on seasonal costs of fresh vegetables, frozen and canned vegetables may be the best buy. They can also be stored longer than fresh vegetables.

Common Kitchen Measurements

3 teaspoons = 1 tablespoon
4 tablespoons = 1/4 cup
5 1/3 tablespoons = 1/3 cup
8 tablespoons = 1/2 cup
16 tablespoons = 1 cup
16 ounces = 1 pound
1 ounce = 28 grams
1 kilogram = 2.2 pounds
1 cup = 8 fluid ounces
1 cup = 1/2 pint
2 cups = 1 pint
4 cups = 1 quart
4 quarts = 1 gallon
8 quarts = 1 peck
1 quart is approximately equal to one liter
(1 quart = .946 liter)

Leftovers vs. "Planned-overs"

When you plan your food purchases and preparations ahead, you can use a planned-over strategy to make your own convenience meals. For example, a large beef or pork roast can be served as a roast, and used later in the week for stew or soup. Large turkeys are usually a better buy because the flesh to bone proportions are better. After roasting large turkeys, cut meat from the bone so that you have enough for a turkey dinner. Remaining turkey can be repackaged and frozen in amounts that can be used in casseroles, pot pies, or sandwiches. The turkey carcass can be put back into a stew pot for the beginning of turkey soup.

When it comes to baking, save some energy costs and economize your time by baking many items in one session. Double batches of many baked goods will allow some to be repackaged, frozen and used at a later time. When freezing your items, be sure to label and date them so they can be used within a reasonable time.

If your family is small or you live by yourself, prepare recipes for large casseroles and then divide them into smaller casserole dishes. Bake one for present use and freeze one for future use.

Your Protein Dollar

Protein-rich foods are important for meeting nutritional needs, especially of growing children and pregnant or breast feeding women, but they can also be the most costly part of food budgets. To manage your food costs, remember that an adequate serving of cooked meat, fish or poultry is 2-3 ounces rather than 5-6 ounces or more. Balance higher cost sources of protein with lower cost sources to stay within your food budget as well. Casserole dishes that combine protein sources from meat, poultry, fish, dry beans, eggs and/or cheese with vegetables and pasta or rice are excellent ways to stretch your food dollar.

Check "specials" when purchasing meats. You may be able to afford items that are usually not a part of your food budget when these items go on sale. Look for cuts and types of meat, poultry and fish that give you the most lean and least waste in bones and other trimmings. *Table I* provides information on the number of servings per market unit for various sources of protein. Divide the cost of the market unit by the number of servings per market unit to find out how much each serving of protein rich food will cost. Here are some examples: if beef roast is on sale for \$2.29 per pound and you are able to get four servings per pound, the cost per serving is \$2.29 divided by 4, or 57 cents. Ground beef that sells for \$1.99 per pound will cost 50 cents per serving. Dry beans that sell for 99 cents for four pounds cost 25 cents per pound uncooked and about 5 cents per cooked one cup serving. For more convenience, you can purchase cooked canned beans at 67 cents for 16 ounce can. The cost for a one cup serving is 33.5 cents. At 89 cents a dozen, a 2-egg omelette costs almost 15 cents for the eggs.

Table I. Servings of Protein-rich foods per market unit

Food Item and Form	Market Unit	Approximate servings per market unit*
Chicken, broiler-fryer, whole	1 lb.	2
Turkey, bone in	1 lb	2
Turkey, boneless roast	1 lb	3-4
Turkey, ground	1 lb	4
Eggs	1 dozen	6
Fish, fresh or frozen fillets	1 lb	3-4
Fish cakes, unbreaded	1 lb	4
Fish cakes, breaded	1 lb	5
Beef or pork, ground	1 lb	4
Beef or pork, steaks, chops, and roasts	1 lb	3-4
Beef or pork, shoulder cuts, ribs, neck	1 lb	1-2
Ham, boneless	1 lb	4-5
Beans, canned kidney, pinto, red, black, navy	15 - 16 oz can	2 cups
Beans, cooked dried kidney, pinto, red, black, navy	1 lb	5-6 cups

*Amounts are based on three ounces of cooked poultry meat without bone and three ounces of cooked and trimmed meat. One cup of cooked beans is equivalent to 2 ounce serving of meat.

Enjoy Your Meals

Meals can taste and look great and still fit into your food budget. To add attractiveness to your meals,

take an extra minute to set a pretty table. Place a plant or a bowl of fruits on the table. Arrange food on plates in attractive patterns.

When the rest of the meal seems dull, sparkle it up with a hot bread, a pretty vegetable or fruit, and a special, nutritious dessert. Plan meals for eye and taste appeal as well as for nutrition. Include a variety of colors, textures, forms and types of foods.

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