The Real Health Real-World Food Challenge

An amazing 7-day, no-cooking, low-spending, good-eating meal plan.

August 31, 2007 By Laura Whitehorn and Nicole Joseph

Dear readers, you told us in a recent *Real Health* survey, cost was your biggest barrier to eating more healthfully. Another was time: You cook only three times a week or fewer. Still, nearly half of you have high blood pressure and need to watch your sodium intake; others have diabetes or high cholesterol. So we set out to see if we could help you design a healthy meal plan to fit your needs.

The challenge Come up with seven days' worth of food—including three meals per day plus a snack and dessert. Spend no more than $20 a day. No cutting, mixing, chopping or cooking permitted, other than heating prepared foods in a microwave or oven. Meanwhile, consume healthy amounts of sodium, cholesterol, carbs, calories and saturated fats.

The players Five *Real Health* staffers took the bait, and New York–based nutritionist Constance Brown-Riggs, author of *Eating Soulfully and Healthfully With Diabetes* (iUniverse), judged our results.

What we expected "We'll never do it on only $20 a day," we all protested. And we thought that eating all that prepared food would send our daily calorie count sky-high.

What we found The price tag and calories were not the problem—in fact, we never reached $20 or 2,000 calories, the daily reference value used by the FDA. But we found it nearly impossible to hold a day's sodium intake down to the recommended limit for anyone concerned with high blood pressure (about 1,500 mg a day). To do that, unfortunately, you need to cook. To avoid the sodium highs, we ended up consuming fewer calories a day than we had expected—yet, no one went hungry.

Here's how we did it, day by day.

MONDAY

The menu

Breakfast

Scrambled-egg sandwich on wheat toat; Glass OJ

Lunch

McDonald’s caesar salad with grilled chicken without dressing

Snack

Baby carrots and ranch dip

Dinner

Stouffers Meatloaf with mashed potatoes; Deli salad, chopped

Dessert

2 soft, sugar-free chocolate chip cookies

DAILY TOTALS
Calories 1,329
Carbs 107 g
Saturated Fat: 16 g
Cholesterol: 520 mg
Sodium: 2,445 mg
Price: $13.40

Nicole Joseph
Assistant Editor

23; 5’7"; 120 lbs; BMI (Body Mass Index) 18.6

Biggest Concerns:
I want to add muscle and strength, so my goal is to add pounds while reducing costs and cholesterol (my family’s medical history includes high cholesterol).

Diet diary:
I usually eat a scrambled-egg sandwich with ham or bacon. To limit my cholesterol intake, I left off the meat, but I missed it. I love baby carrots with ranch dip. I’m from the Midwest—I like ranch on everything. It has 120 calories per 2 tablespoons, so it’s a weight-gainer for me—even though it’s a bit high in saturated fat. I might try a lowfat variety...someday.

CONSTANCE COMMENTS

Nicole mentions watching cholesterol, but I doubt that hers is high. Still, she's right to be cautious. It's good that she omitted the cholesterol-laden ham and bacon from her egg sandwich. She does need to add at least two more servings of fruit and three of dairy to her diet. To replace the meat she craves—without adding fat and sodium—I suggest she try a breakfast sandwich of turkey, light Swiss cheese and scrambled egg whites. It's delicious.

TUESDAY

The menu

Breakfast

Small bagel with 1 slice swiss cheese; Fruit cup; Apple juice

Lunch

Subway deli ham sandwich

Snack

Granola bar

Dinner

Lean Cuisine Baked Lemon Pepper Fish

Dessert

Ben & Jerry's Cherry Garcia ice cream

DAILY TOTALS
Calories 1,207
Carbs 170 g
Saturated Fat: 16 g
Cholesterol: 175 mg
Sodium: 1,807 mg
Price: $10.13

Al Morris
Software Engineer

28; 6'2"; 235 lbs; BMI (Body Mass Index) 30.1

Biggest Concerns:
I have high cholesterol and a family history of high blood pressure and diabetes. I'm also watching my weight (and wallet).

Diet diary:
I try to avoid cheese, because it's so high in cholesterol. But I needed something on that bagel. I learned that I can't eat granola and fruit at the same time-I get gassy. Next time I'll break those up into two separate snacks. Trust me on this. That Ben & Jerry's made the whole day worthwhile. Now I have to play some ball to burn off all that cholesterol

CONSTANCE COMMENTS
To lose weight, Al should eat no more than 15 grams of saturated fat a day (assuming a 1,500-calorie-a-day diet). He should ditch the Ben & Jerry's-11 grams saturated fat! Cheers for the fruit cup: no fat or cholesterol. His menu's total cholesterol is great; keep that under 225.

WEDNESDAY

The menu

Breakfast

1 boiled egg; 2 slices wheat toast with grape jelly; Banana; Coffee with milk

Lunch

2 turkey hot dogs on buns; Cole slaw

Snack

Apple; Yogurt; Raw unsalted cashews

Dinner

Amy's Tofu Vegetable Lasagna

Dessert

Sherbet with sliced peach

DAILY TOTALS
Calories 1,330
Carbs 224 g
Saturated Fat: 18 g
Cholesterol: 301 mg

Sodium: 2,146 mg
Price: $13.41

Kellee Terrell
Assistant Editor

29; 5’3"; 145 lbs; BMI (Body Mass Index) 25.6

Biggest Concerns:
I want to limit cost, sodium, calories and fat-my family has a history of high blood pressure, diabetes and obesity, though (fortunately!) I haven’t had any of those problems myself.

Diet diary:
I work out regularly, so I feel OK about splurging on fries once in a while. Because I knew *RH* was watching, I ate cashews instead.

CONSTANCE COMMENTS
Because the risk of developing high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes and cancer increases as weight increases, and because there’s obesity in her family, Kellee’s biggest concern should be calories: She weighs about five pounds more than she should. If she sticks to this menu’s daily calorie count, she will gradually lose weight-the best way to go. Her diet today was a bit high in saturated fat; she should keep it to 15 grams.

THURSDAY

The menu

Breakfast

Apple Jacks cereal with 2% milk

Lunch

Burger King Tendergrill Garden Salad without dressing

Snack

Planters Heart-Healthy Mix nuts; Snapple Mango Madness

Dinner

Smart Ones Shrimp Marinara

Dessert

Klondike Choco Taco ice cream treat

DAILY TOTALS
Calories 1,289
Carbs 153 g
Saturated Fat: 20 g
Cholesterol: 191 mg
Sodium: 1,908 mg
Price: $13.87

Shavon Greene
Editorial Intern

19; 5’2"; 140 lbs; BMI (Body Mass Index) 25.5

Biggest Concerns:
Cost-and my lack of knowledge about nutrition. My family history includes high blood pressure, diabetes and heart attacks.

Diet diary:
I don’t usually associate good taste with healthful food, so I learned from this challenge. For instance, you can actually choose something that’s pretty good for you at Burger King. I eat a lot of fast food, so this was a good surprise. I’m a big snacker, which is a problem: I snack on chips and candy and have no appetite when it’s actual mealtime. The mixed nuts did it for me, though-they satisfied my hunger without torpedoing my dinnertime appetite.

CONSTANCE COMMENTS
Shavon is slightly overweight, and if she could lose 5 pounds it would be great. To learn about healthy food, she can consult a registered dietitian or an online tool such as mypyramid.gov. Her snacking is a *good* trait. Eating three small meals and three snacks can boost metabolism and promote weight loss. She might try fresh fruit or a few whole-grain crackers.

FRIDAY

The menu

Breakfast

Quaker Maple & Brown Sugar Instant Oatmeal; Coffee with milk; Mixed fruit salad

Lunch

1/2 can Bumble Bee Chunk Light Tuna in water, with dill; Celery sticks with mayo; Bean salad

Snack

Granola with apples & nuts; Raisins

Dinner

Lean Cuisine Garlic Beef & Broccoli; 2 slices whole-wheat bread

Dessert

Fudgsicle pop

DAILY TOTALS
Calories 1,449
Carbs 221 g
Saturated Fat: 7.7 g
Cholesterol: 104 mg
Sodium: 2,117 mg
Price: $12.84

Kellee Terrell
Assistant Editor

29; 5’3"; 145 lbs; BMI (Body Mass Index) 25.6

Diet diary:
Iused brown sugar and soy milk in my coffee (to avoid lactose). The dill added a really nice kick to the flavor of my tuna. The Fudgsicle was my favorite part of today’s menu.

CONSTANCE COMMENTS
The amount of saturated fat in Kellee’s diet was much better today. But that brown sugar in her coffee? If that’s for the flavor, fine. But she’s kidding herself if she thinks brown sugar has nutritional benefit over white. To avoid adding more cholesterol to her diet, Kellee might try focusing on nonanimal food groups: grains, fruits, veggies, nuts.

SATURDAY

The menu

Breakfast

Cheerios with skim milk; Banana

Lunch

Healthy Choice Country Vegetable soup; Low-sodium cheddar cheese sandwich on wheat bread with mayo; Baked chips

Snack

Wheat crackers; 2 plums

Dinner

Supermarket barbecue chicken; Carrots; Broccoli

Dessert

Dannon Light & Fit nonfat blueberry yogurt cup; Sugar-free cheesecake

DAILY TOTALS
Calories 1,330
Carbs 204 g
Saturated Fat: 13 g
Cholesterol: 133 mg
Sodium: 1,622 mg
Price: $14.81

Nicole Joseph
Assistant Editor

23; 5’7"; 120 lbs; BMI (Body Mass Index) 18.6

Diet diary:
Cereal is a very quick and easy way for me to get a healthy breakfast before I run out the door. The soup had a ton of veggies, and it’s nice to find a vegetarian meal that still can fill you up. I’m surprised by the low amount of sodium in my dinner; I generally expect barbecue chicken to have a ton of it! And cheesecake might just be my favorite dessert; I was glad to be able to sneak it in.

CONSTANCE COMMENTS
The main problem with Nicole’s menus is too few calories. She needs at least 1,800 a day to help her gain weight. Yet, she still needs to keep cholesterol and saturated fat low. She might add calories by trying a fruit and walnut salad with yogurt. This is a good way to get calories without adding too many grams of saturated fat or cholesterol. Plus, it’s a tasty way to add fiber-you need about 25 to 25 grams daily to keep your digestion humming.

SUNDAY

The menu

Breakfast

Banana walnut muffin with jelly; Sugar-free cranberry-apricot juice; Cheese stick

Lunch

Boston Market 5 oz roasted turkey meal with side orders (green beans & garlic potatoes) and corn bread

Snack

1 oz raw almonds; Apple

Dinner

Roast beef sandwich on wheat with lettuce, tomato, light mayo; 6 baby carrots

Dessert

Chocolate-covered graham crackers

DAILY TOTALS
Calories 1,971
Carbs 245 g
Saturated Fat: 21 g
Cholesterol: 173 mg
Sodium: 2,744 mg
Price: $17.89

Kenyon Farrow
Editorial Intern

32; 5’11"; 162 lbs; BMI (Body Mass Index) 22.5

Biggest Concerns:
Watching fat and sodium content. I know I need to think more about sugar too, because diabetes runs in my family on both sides. High blood pressure and obesity are problems in my family, though I’m pretty thin.

Diet diary:

Lunch is usually my biggest meal of the day. This turkey dinner was a way to do it big and still be healthy. For supper, the sandwich waas perfect-inexpensive and good for me.

CONSTANCE COMMENTS

Kenyon's BMI, 22.6, and weight are excellent, but his total sodium intake is too high; it should certainly not exceed 2,300 mg daily. That's the problem with all this eating out: There are simply very fast food options that aren't packed with sodium. And try to steer clear of the pickles, relish, olives or sauerkraut-all are high in sodium.

BEST IN SHOW

At the end of our week of eating, one meal stood out as being both low in cost and high in nutritional value. The star: **Supermarket barbecue chicken**. You see these birds glistening in display cases near the deli department. A BBQ chicken is cheap (about $5 to $7) and easy-slice some meat off, refrigerate the rest for later. It's slightly high in cholesterol (75 mg per serving) but not too high in sodium, calories or fat-especially if you discard some or all of the skin. Special added attractions: good amounts of niacin, potassium, selenium, vitamin B-6 and other key nutrients. Add baby carrots, steamed broccoli and a slice or two of wheat bread and you have a tasty, balanced meal.

BY THE NUMBERS

How to check your daily nutritional intake

Want to take our challenge but not sure how to tell how many calories, carbs or fat grams you're consuming? Most package labels list nutritional content. Just be sure to note the number of portions in the package; the nutrient counts are calculated per serving. "Serving in this package" can help you know how much to eat. Tip: Divide the contents into servings before you dig in. Or go online. The name implies that it's all about the calories, but **calorie-count.com** actually provides complete nutritional information on hundreds of your favorite foods.

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