Healthy Eating on a Shoestring Budget

These days two things are a priority for most people: their budget and their health.

December 2, 2009 By Asata Reid

Let's get right to the point: Despite the negative rumors, you can enjoy a healthy, delicious and satisfying relationship with food even during this economic crunch.

These seven tips will help you make the most of your food dollars.

Take advantage of seasonal produce.
Produce is most nutritious when it is at the peak of freshness. That's when it's meant to be consumed. Lucky for us, that's usually when it is the least expensive. It's a good example of the economic principle of supply-and-demand. An abundance of in-season crops drives their price down because produce is perishable and what farmers and markets can't sell, they must throw away and eat the loss. But it's a chance for you to reap the benefits of what they sow. To bolster your budget, check out what produce is in season in your area. For more tips on seasonal eating, visit eattheseasons.com.

Make soups, stews and chilies.
What feels better after a long, hard day than a bowl of homemade soup with a healthy hunk of whole grain corn bread on the side? Talk about love in a bowl! Soup is a fantastic medium for delivering the health benefits of vegetable and chicken broths, as well as a soul-satisfying smorgasbord of vegetables and small amounts of lean meats. Toss in some whole grains or beans and fresh herbs and you have all your important food groups in one pot. (Plus, cleanup is minimal.) Soup is a great way to finish any leftovers. Experiment with new ingredients by adding a little of this and a dab of that to suit your tastes. Soups, stews and chilies prepared in a slow cooker will practically make themselves. Miso (a rich, salty Japanese condiment) and broth-based soups are ready in mere minutes. For some tried-and-true, user-friendly recipes, check out allrecipes.com and cookinglight.com.

Eat more whole grains and legumes.
Beans and rice are eaten the world over for two reasons: They are cheap, and they are nutritious. Beans (most legumes) and whole grains such as brown rice, quinoa (pronounced keen-wah) and even popcorn are high in fiber, which promotes a healthy digestive system and can help reduce the risk of some cancers and lower blood cholesterol levels. Legumes and whole grains are considered complex carbohydrates (good carbs) and have a low glycemic index. In addition, they

are good sources of sustained energy. Most beans provide protein, an excellent energy source and a nutrient that forms the building blocks of hair, nails, bones, skin, cartilage, muscles, blood and even hormones. Various rice and bean dishes reflect a variety of cultures on every continent. Go international with your research and look for Indian recipes using garbanzos and lentils, Italian recipes using kidney and cannelloni beans, Asian recipes using adzuki beans and edamame, Caribbean recipes using pigeon peas, Cuban recipes using black beans, and Tex Mex recipes using pinto beans…you get the picture.

Cut back on fatty, expensive meats.
In his book *Food Matters*, Matt Bittman, a *New York Times* food columnist, stresses that we should eat more fruits, veggies and whole grains and cut back on meat and animal products, refined carbohydrates and junk food. “If you followed those general rules and read no farther, you’d be doing yourself and the earth a favor,” Bittman says.

Red meat is the No. 1 source of dietary cholesterol. Most of the world serves small pieces or slices of meat—think stews, stir-fries, lasagna and curries—versus 12-ounce steaks or even 8-ounce burgers. Aim for 3 ounces or less of meat in a meal, and think of it as more of a condiment than the featured item. This will allow you to save more money and become creative in preparing main meals from vegetables, fruits and whole grains.

Most often used as side dishes, these nourishing—and delicious—foods fill the bulk of our nutritional needs. In addition, they are proven, effective disease fighters.

Grow your own herbs.
Few things in life are simpler than growing herbs. These plants don’t need much maintenance and can thrive with a small amount of light. Fresh herbs add flavor to vegetables and meats. Toss some basil, chervil, chives or mint into your next salad. Marinate chicken and steak with thyme, rosemary, oregano or marjoram before grilling, baking or sautéing. Bake or grill fish with fresh dill, chervil or parsley. Fresh herbs help boost flavor in just about everything and turn up the volume on savory dishes when you’re replacing fats and sodium.

Start a container garden.
If you’ve mastered growing a few herbs on a sunny windowsill, branch out into container gardening and grow vegetables you love to eat. Beth Perdue, a horticulturist at Georgia’s Atlanta Botanical Garden, says container gardening is something anyone can do.

“There are many benefits that come with container gardening,” Perdue says. “Pots are easier to maintain than plant beds; they have fewer weeds; pest control is on a smaller scale; they can be shifted around to get more or less sun; and you can bring your herbs in for the winter.”

Small spaces are ideal for container gardens, according to Perdue. She suggests looking for plants labeled as “dwarf, compact, patio or bush” for your containers.

“These plants will perform better in pots than their full-size counterparts,” Perdue explains. “You

can make it as simple or creative as you want.”

Container gardening requires nothing more than a sunny patch of yard, front stoop or back patio to produce a plentiful yield and save money on your grocery bill. These miniature gardens can be very beautiful too. Some gardeners coordinate the containers with their outdoor decor or even use actual art for containers. Container gardening is an environmentalist’s dream and a great place to practice that mantra: reduce, reuse and recycle.

For more tips on container gardening, Perdue recommends reading *The Edible Container Garden* by Michael Guerra and visiting your botanical garden libraries and websites.

Buy frozen produce.
Frozen foods can save time and money. Frozen produce is picked when ripe and quickly frozen (usually within 24 hours of being harvested), which, in many cases, preserves the nutrients in the foods. Frozen produce usually retains its nutrients better than fresh produce, which is shipped and stored over the course of days and weeks. In fact, in many cases, more food nutrients are lost during cooking than in the freezing process.

When pinching pennies, it’s easy to catch BOGO (Buy One, Get One free) sales on frozen broccoli, corn, carrots, green beans and vegetable blends and stock your freezer for those last-minute meals when you have nothing fresh on hand. Just make sure you use them within six months to prevent freezer burn. Ultra convenient to use, frozen vegetables go into slow cookers, steamers, stir-fries, soups and stews without missing a beat. To control your fat and sodium intake, avoid dressing the frozen veggies with butter, cream and teriyaki sauces.

Field Pea and Sweet Corn Salad
(Serves 4 to 6)

1 15 oz. can of field peas (black beans, pintos or other beans), rinsed
1 16 oz. bag of frozen sweet corn, thawed
½ red onion, diced
½ cup cilantro leaves, chopped
2 Roma tomatoes, diced
µ cup prepared salsa
½ tsp. ground cumin
½ tsp. smoked paprika juice from 1 lime

Combine all ingredients, stirring well. Cover and refrigerate at least 20 minutes before serving to allow flavors to develop.

Per ½ cup serving: 125 calories, 1 g total fat, 0 g saturated fat, 0 g polyunsaturated fat, 0 g monounsaturated fat, 0 mg cholesterol, 473 mg sodium, 464 mg potassium, 26 g total carbohydrate, 5 g dietary fiber, 2 g sugar, 6 g protein.

The Dirty Dozen
Some fruits and veggies are best bought organic.

Spend the extra pennies for organically grown versions of these foods. Why? As research advocates at the Environmental Working Group explain, some plants are susceptible to insects and require more pesticides while others have thin skins that absorb pesticides. Generally, if you eat the food's skin, go organic. And keep in mind, a food's skin also packs nutrients for extra health benefits.

1. Apples decrease risk of cardiovascular disease, cancer and asthma.
2. Cherries lower risk of heart disease.
3. Grapes promote healthy arteries.
4. Nectarines help prevent heart disease, macular degeneration and cancer.
5. Peaches contain cancer-fighting antioxidants.
6. Pears contain fiber, potassium, calcium and protein.
7. Raspberries are rich in vitamin C, folate, iron, potassium and fiber.
8. Strawberries help prevent cardiovascular disease, cancer and cognitive dysfunction.
9. Bell peppers lower risk of prostate and cervical cancer, promote night vision and protect against cataracts.
10. Celery contains vitamins B, A, C and K, calcium, magnesium and dietary fiber.
11. Potatoes are high in vitamins C and B6.
12. Spinach promotes eye, heart and bone health and fights certain cancers.

But studies show that some foods, whether grown conventionally or organically, do not contain pesticide residue. Save a few bucks on the fruits and veggies on this list:

- Bananas
- Kiwi
- Mangos
- Papaya
- Pineapples
- Asparagus
- Avocado
- Broccoli
- Cauliflower
- Corn
- Onions

- Peas

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