Value Menu

Stay healthy, even when the economy is sick.

May 29, 2009 By James Wortman

In the midst of a crushing recession, we're all thinking of new ways to save cash, whether it's chillin' at home on the weekends, buying toilet paper in bulk at Sam's Club or clipping coupons every week. Unfortunately, as a strategy to cut costs, some are sacrificing healthy habits, which tend to be more expensive. Think trading gym memberships and organic produce for couch potato lifestyles and Dollar Menu cheeseburgers in order to afford rent and utilities.

"If you're just trying to make ends meet, health is not necessarily the most immediate concern, and I say this with regret as a public health professional," says Adam Drewnowski, PhD, director of the Nutritional Sciences Program at the University of Washington in Seattle.

But contrary to popular belief, being poverty-stricken and unable to buy enough food to eat doesn't translate into losing weight. Numerous studies show it can mean the exact opposite. Drewnowski conducted a study in 2007 that found obesity rates may be up to six times higher in lower
economic areas than in wealthier ones.

The fact is, however, even before the government bailed out Wall Street and employers served up pink slips, many Americans had an unhealthy relationship with nutrition and fitness. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), about 72 percent of black men and 80 percent of black women are overweight. And despite President Obama's recovery plan, economic relief may take some time.

But here's the good news: Having less money doesn't mean that your diet has to suffer. You'll have to become a more savvy home economist, however, to create a common sense budget—and to buy smart as well.

"Cooking's not hard, and it doesn't have to take all day," says Atlanta-based chef and food consultant Asata Reid, a.k.a. The Life Chef. Nor does it have to cost a bundle. She suggests buying cheaper, locally grown and in-season produce as well as planning meals in advance and avoiding unnecessary purchases when shopping. "When times are tight, you need to think about the money that you have right now, and not the six cans of pasta sauce you can stockpile," she says.

And what about exercise? Not having a gym membership is not an excuse to sit around and be inactive. Netflix movie club plans cost as low as $4.99 a month and give you access to a wide selection of workout DVDs. You may also access websites, such as Self.com, YogaJournal.com and SparkPeople.com, which offer free cardio, strength and Pilates workouts.

The ultimate exercise in economy and efficiency, however, is using your own two feet. “Walking is [free],” says Robert Eckel, MD, former president of the American Heart Association. “Getting 30 minutes [of walking] in five days a week is certainly possible for most people.”

Remember, regardless of what the dollar is worth, your health is priceless.

And you can take that to the bank.

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