

Healthy Eating, Healthy Wallet



With prices rising every week, food has become more of a luxury item than a staple. Even government assistance only goes so far; SNAP benefits for an individual are capped at about \$195 a month. Those who pay cash really feel the pinch. Healthy eating on a budget? When I began writing this column, I expected it to be a challenge. Surprise! With the right strategies it can be less expensive than what you are doing now.

First, let's debunk a myth: Healthy eating isn't about excluding everything but high-priced "all natural" and organic brands. It's about whole foods, local resources, and cooking with flair; and it can be easier than you think.

Before we even get to what to buy, let's talk about where to buy it. Twenty dollars at a bargain chain like PriceRite can often buy literally twice what you'll get for the same cash at Shaw's, including organics. On the other hand, PriceRite doesn't take coupons. If you play your sales right you can pick stuff up practically for free at the bigger chain stores. Another tip: If you have a family to feed, consider joining a wholesale club or food co-op. If you shop around, you can save hundreds of dollars a year on food.

Next: Processed, packaged and prepared food is nearly always more expensive than whole food. You should toss these out anyway! Most are loaded with extra sodium, chemicals and refined sugars and the "natural" brands are absurdly overpriced. It is well worth your while to learn some basic cooking skills. With the right recipes, even a novice with a hot plate can whip up a wholesome meal. Just Google what you want, and you'll have hundreds of quick, easy recipes at your fingertips in minutes.

Nutritional quality versus price: Protein is often the most expensive item on your grocery list, but the most expensive sources aren't always the healthiest. If red meat is still on your list, let's compare filet mignon to bargain chuck. Side by side, the tougher cuts are not only cheaper, they also usually have more protein and less fat. Cooking them takes a bit more work, but housewives have been doing it for decades. So can you. While you're at it, ditch those limp boneless chicken breasts and switch to succulent thighs and whole chicken. And when you are considering seafood, consider this: Pricey lobster and shrimp practically ooze cholesterol while levels are low in the humble tilapia filet. High omega-3s are what you want in seafood, not high prices.

Of course, the most affordable proteins of all are whole grains, legumes and beans. A bag of lentils that goes for \$1.79 at Price Rite can be converted into a pot of delicious soup that can be frozen and stretched for days. Grains and legumes are not only a staple for vegetarians; they can serve as high-quality fillers to make meat go further. You can spend less than \$15 and get the ingredients to make a chili or stew that'll last one person 10 meals. The internet is full of new recipes and ideas. But if you want to go full-out vegan, make sure you understand how to balance your amino acids; not all plant

proteins are complete. Soy and seitan can stand alone, but you're gonna need rice if you're gonna have beans.

We don't always consider its importance, but the cooking method that you use can be vital to the value of your food. Anyone can leap to healthier eating in a single bound if they stopped frying food. We think of oil as our enemy, but it's not if we don't heat it. Eaten raw, the same oil that can clog your arteries and bulge your butt will emulsify stored fat instead.

Time is a problem for many of us, and it can seem so much easier to buy prepared food that requires no further attention than reheating. But with a little planning, you can make big batches of your favorite recipes and freeze or store them to make your own fast food. The first few times you do it, it will be pain in the ass. After you get used to it, cooking can be quite relaxing and fun. It's a chance to express your creativity and make food just the way you like it.

But more than a grocery list, healthy eating is a way of life. Too many of us gulp and run without really tasting. A long, relaxing meal with companions and laughter is one of the things that makes life worth living. Healthy eating should not be dismal resignation to unseasoned, boring crap. It should be a celebration of one undeniable fact: We may have to give up many of the habits we love because they do us more harm than good ... smoking, drinking, sleeping around? ... but the one thing we will always get to do is eat.

Salute!