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Healthy Eating Doesn't Have to Cost a Lot

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Madison, Wis.--Food prices are continuing their steady climb, leaving many people wondering how they can afford to maintain a healthy diet.

"Families trying to stretch their resources can still eat healthy meals and snacks," says Karie Lutz, Nutrition Educator with the University of Wisconsin-Extension-Walworth County. "Many nutrient-dense foods--foods with a lot of nutrients but few calories--remain economically priced."

- Learn what healthy foods are low in price most of the time. (See list below.)
- Compare Nutrition Facts on food labels, as well as prices, to find the best nutrition buy for your money. For example, the Nutrition Facts for a store brand whole grain breakfast cereal and name brand whole grain breakfast cereal might be the same, even though the name brand might cost more.
- Use dry beans in place of some or all of the ground meat in recipes. Cooked lentils are a great meat extender or substitute for meat in spaghetti sauce and meat loaf. Similarly, cooked pinto beans work well in burritos, enchiladas and tacos.
- Use lower-cost alternatives in recipes where it will not make a big difference to the recipe. For example, frozen ground turkey, which is usually cheaper and may have less fat than ground beef, is a great substitute for ground beef in recipes such as chili.
- Be willing to spend a little more time preparing foods. In most cases, the more processed a food is, the more it will cost. For example, a one-pound bag of baby carrots usually costs more than a one-pound bag of standard carrots. Scrubbing, peeling and cutting the standard carrots yourself could save you money. Similarly, popcorn that is already popped or in a convenience form usually costs more than popcorn that needs to be popped in a kettle or popcorn popper.
- Purchase cheese in blocks that you can slice and grate for snacks and recipes.
- Take advantage of food sales if you have the space to safely store what you won't use right away. For example, buy large quantities of chicken when it is a good price, put meal-size amounts into freezer bags or containers and freeze until ready to use. Similarly, stock up on canned and frozen fruits and vegetables when they are on sale.
- Plan meals and snacks ahead of time using low-cost favorites and grocery store flyers that can help you find weekly specials.
- Prepare meals and snacks at home and take them with you rather than purchasing meals and snacks at a restaurant or from a vending machine. For example, a brown-bag lunch containing a tuna salad sandwich made with water-packed tuna, low-fat mayonnaise and whole wheat bread, carrot sticks, a banana and fat-free milk is lower in fat and calories,

higher in fiber and less expensive than a typical tuna salad sandwich with potato chips and a soda purchased at a sandwich shop.

--Choose healthy, low-cost foods for snacks. Examples of healthy, inexpensive snacks are graham crackers with a glass of fat-free milk, carrot sticks with a bean dip, or a homemade trail mix made with cereal, raisins and peanuts.

--Grow some of your own vegetables. Even a few tomato plants in containers on a porch can yield a bounty of tomatoes in the summer.

--Know when foods might be a good buy. For example, whole turkeys are often a good buy around Thanksgiving, fresh apples are a good buy in the fall and oranges in the winter.

--Frozen and canned vegetables and fruits may be less expensive than fresh, especially when the fresh varieties are not in season. Choose frozen vegetables without sauces, and fruits canned in juice to reduce fat and sugar.

Here is a list of foods from the main food groups that are generally a good buy for the money.

--**Grains**—brown rice, oatmeal, whole-grain breads and tortillas (especially day-old items), whole-grain pastas, popcorn, unsweetened cereal bought in bulk.

--**Vegetables**—cabbage, carrots, many canned vegetables, frozen vegetables without added sauce or butter, onions, potatoes, sweet potatoes, tomato sauce.

--**Fruits**—applesauce, bananas, canned fruits packed in juice or light syrup, frozen orange juice concentrate, kiwi fruit, raisins.

--**Milk**—fat-free or low-fat (1/2% or 1%) milk, block of low-fat cheese (cheddar, Colby, Swiss or mozzarella).

--**Meat and beans**—canned tuna, eggs, dry beans and peas (black beans, black-eyed peas, kidney beans, lentils, pinto beans, split peas), frozen ground turkey, peanut butter.

For more information on ways to eat healthy on a budget, contact Karie Lutz Nutrition Educator, at UW Extension Walworth County office 262-741-4957 or karie.lutz@ces.uwex.edu.

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