

# Eat Well, Spend Less

**Q**uality food may seem expensive, but you don't have to wait for sales, buy store brands, and clip coupons to afford it. I asked Sandra Gluck, food editor at *Everyday Food* and *Body + Soul* magazines; Wendy Kohatsu, MD, an integrative physician and culinary student; and Marion Nestle, PhD, MPH, nutritionist and author of *What to Eat* (North Point Press, 2006), for their suggestions to help maximize nutrition—and extend your food dollar.

## How to Shop the Supermarket

**Stick to the perimeter.** Supermarkets keep fresh foods and perishables along the edges of the store and processed foods in the center aisles. Processed foods are almost always more expensive (compare the cost of potatoes, carrots, or spinach to a bag of vegetable chips, or of rolled oats to boxed cereal).

**Reduce animal protein, except fish.** Meat and dairy are among the most expensive items you'll put in your cart, so eating even one or two plant-based meals a day instead will save you money. Adopt Asian or Mediterranean eating habits, which emphasize fresh produce and whole grains. Instead of planning meals around meat, think of it more as a condiment or flavoring agent, or sneak in substitutes. Bulgur wheat has a "mouthfeel" similar to ground meat; use it to partially or completely replace the meat in chili or other meat-based dishes. Textured vegetable protein, or TVP, is another inexpensive substitute.

**Pack in produce.** A USDA study found that, on average, seven servings of fruits and vegetables cost less than \$1 per day. What's more, fresh is usually cheaper than frozen or canned when you consider the cost per serving. Stock up on inexpensive basics like carrots (expand your recipe

repertoire; instead of boiled carrots, try carrot-raisin slaw). Balance cost against convenience when it comes to items like pre-cut vegetables, shredded cheese, or bagged salads. And plan in advance how you'll use leftovers to reduce waste. Also consider growing some produce. Lack the space? No green thumb? Most herbs thrive all year in a sunny window.


**Fresh, frozen, or canned?** In general, I recommend buying fresh foods whenever possible. Nutritionally, frozen is almost as good (and sometimes better, if the food is out of season), although you'll sacrifice some flavor and texture with many frozen vegetables. I usually avoid most canned goods except beans, tomato products, water-packed fish, and soup. When buying frozen or canned foods, look for the shortest ingredient list to avoid additives like salt.

**Prioritize organics.** If you can't afford to always buy organic, focus on the foods you eat most often. For example, if you drink lots of milk, you may want to spend more for organic. The nonprofit Environmental Working Group ([ewg.org](http://ewg.org)) regularly updates a list of the "dirty dozen" most pesticide-laden fruits and vegetables, which I also recommend buying organic. The current list, starting with the most contaminated, includes peaches, apples, nectarines, sweet bell peppers, celery, strawberries, cherries, lettuce, grapes (imported), pears, spinach, and potatoes.

**Buy in bulk.** This is a good general strategy, but because buying in bulk isn't always cheaper, check the cost per serving. You might even bring a calculator and notebook so you can compare which store has the best deals on certain items. Stock up on staples like rice, pastas, legumes (canned or dried), grains, nuts, and flaxseed. You can also buy large quantities of fresh, in-season produce (such as blueberries, strawberries, and cherries) and freeze them for use later in the year. Tomatoes can also be frozen whole.

**Freeze more.** Proper storage helps prevent spoilage. Label and date everything that's not in its original package. Meat, poultry, and fish should be well wrapped in individual portions and stored in zip-top bags or other freezer-safe containers. Nuts and flaxseed go rancid quickly; extend their life by freezing them. Grains can also be frozen. Spread berries and cherries in a single layer on a baking sheet; once they're frozen, store in a zip-top bag.

**Cook once, use twice.** Plan meals with foods that can do double- or triple-duty. If you buy a head of broccoli for pasta primavera one night, save the stalks and a few florets; the next day, cook the stalks in vegetable broth until they're soft and purée them to make a creamy base for broccoli soup. Use leftover bread for croutons, bread crumbs, or bread pudding.

**Get creative with leftovers.** Waste is expensive; create less of it by using extra vegetables in dishes like soups, frittatas, ratatouille, sauces, stir-fries, and homemade vegetable stock, or steam or sauté vegetables and freeze them. Freeze big batches of soups, sauces, and stocks in individual portions or ice-cube trays for use later. Freeze leftover herbs in ice-cube trays with olive oil or water, or dry them. If all else fails, compost. 

## Biggest Bang for Your Buck

Stretch your food dollars with these economical sources of key nutrients.

### Antioxidants

- Red kidney beans or pinto beans
- Berries (frozen, if not in season)
- Prunes
- Fuji, Gala, or Granny Smith apples
- Sweet cherries (frozen, if not in season)

### Fiber

- Legumes (beans, lentils, peas, etc.)
- Asian pears
- Bulgur wheat
- Spinach
- Pearled barley

### Monounsaturated fats

- Tree nuts
- Extra-virgin olive oil
- Sunflower, pumpkin, or squash seeds
- Avocados

### Omega-3s

- Canned sockeye salmon
- Canned sardines
- Flaxseed (grind just before use)
- Walnuts

### Protein

- Low- or no-fat cottage cheese
- Canned light tuna or sardines
- Beans, including edamame
- Quinoa grain
- Tofu and soy milk