

With most household budgets feeling the strain after Christmas, the food bill is often the first target for spending cuts. But eating more cheaply shouldn't have to mean eating less healthily. Using foods that are close to their natural source, along with a little extra imagination and organisation, can provide a healthy, prepared-at-home diet that also saves you money.

The COST of healthy eating – good nutrition on a budget

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What healthy eating means

Eating healthily means eating simply. It means not overeating. It means being able to recognise the plants or animals your food came from. It means putting into your body only those natural substances that it knows how to handle. It means eating seasonally, locally and with awareness of the nutritional value of your food.

In a world where convenience is emphasised and time seems short, pre-prepared foods can feel like the obvious choice. But processed and packaged foods don't just strain the environment; with a few exceptions, they can often be a less nutritious option, too. With more things to spend our money on than ever before, we need to remember that, when it comes to processed foods, 'cheap' can also mean nutritionally poor.

Some principles of healthy eating should not be compromised for the sake of cost:

- **Never skimp on vegetables;** find cheaper sources or other ways to economise. Aim for five to eight portions daily for optimal health.
- **Quality proteins** like eggs, nuts, meat, fish and goat's cheese are needed throughout the day, to provide energy and prevent poor food choices.
- **Healthy fats** regulate appetite, mood and metabolism. Extra virgin olive oil, butter, nuts, coconut, Greek yoghurt and avocado help stave off cravings for expensive snacks.
- **Choose fresh fruit** for sweet choices and snacks over more expensive treats, juices and smoothies.

Bread, rice, pasta and potatoes are often used as filling foods when funds are tight, but these cheaper, starchy carbohydrates have been shown to contribute towards mineral deficiencies (e.g. iron and zinc), especially when eaten in higher levels than vegetables^{1,2,3}. From hunter-gatherer beginnings, humans have only been eating these foods for a relatively short time and research links them to the rise in inflammatory and chronic degenerative disease in industrialised societies^{4,5,6}. Carbohydrate foods do not satisfy the appetite for as long as quality fats and protein, so loading up on these starches can leave us feeling hungrier and buying more food later^{7,8}.

Shopping wisely

Shopping can be an enjoyable modern equivalent of the hunter-gatherer experience if we take time and care in the choices we make to nourish ourselves. But it is easy to slip into narrow habits and focus on convenience options when stress is high and time is tight. Deciding to eat healthily on a limited budget provides an opportunity

for some enjoyable exploration and connection back to our food roots. See the box on p13 for tips on healthy shopping on a budget.

Buying cheap bread can be detrimental to health, since modern breads are proofed in as little as 40 minutes, not allowing time to break down anti-nutrients like lectins and phytic acid in grains, which are associated with digestive and immune problems^{9,10}. A high intake of industrially-produced bread may contribute to wheat and gluten intolerance¹¹. Making your own bread is cheaper and provides some enjoyable experiments along the way.

Free-range and organic animal produce, like eggs, meat and dairy (cow, sheep and goat) could offer better value than its price suggests. The nutritional composition of these foods reflects how the animal producing it was treated; if it was able to run around, preferably on a diet of grass not grain, its nutrient content, fat profile and protein to fat ratio is more likely to benefit rather than damage your health^{12,13}. Such quality produce is more

satisfying, shrinks less when cooking and you need less to provide the same amount of nutrients as cheaper and less tasty choices¹⁴.

Prioritising your pennies towards a breakfast with protein like eggs, nuts and goat's cheese has been shown to curb tendencies to stress-buy quick-fix snacks or to binge eat late at night^{15,16}. While it may seem more expensive to eat 'breakfast like a king', a cheap cereal breakfast can actually send you spend-crazy towards the end of the day.

Cutting costs in the kitchen

Getting yourself organised in the kitchen and using food, energy and time wisely can really help you to keep food bills small while preparing delicious and nutritious meals.

Plan ahead Think of menus for the week that will provide variety and interest as well as fulfilling nutritional needs. Use a freezer to help ensure you always have food available. Taking out a portion to defrost before you go out for the day means that it is immediately available to heat up for dinner when you get back. Investing in a soup thermos also means you can take a healthy stew with you as a hot "packed lunch".

Avoid waste Don't be over generous with portion sizes, for the sake of your health as well as your budget. Putting a portion in the fridge for next day's lunch is better than having food left on plates or overeating in order to finish it. Freeze good quality bread, sliced or in chunks, so that you take out just as much as you need (frozen slices can go straight into the toaster).

Use fuel economically Try to use the oven for more than one dish at a time. Cook in batches, so you can use some and put some in the freezer. Investing in a slow



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cooker (around £20) can save money in the long run and slow cooking of grains, beans and root vegetables helps to break them down so that they are easier to digest.

Make things go further The remains of a roast chicken, for example, could be the basis for a nourishing chicken soup, with the addition of some leeks, celery and other vegetables. Adding pulses to stews can reduce the amount of meat you need to use in a dish.

Use leftovers Surplus food can often be used up in soups, stews and curries. Even bits we usually throw away, like the stalks of broccoli and the inner leaves of cauliflowers, can be perfectly edible and are often chock-full of minerals and carotenoid antioxidants.

Keep a good larder Stocking up with spices, herbs, condiments and flavours that you love can inspire you to use those leftovers to great effect. Garlic, onions, lemon juice, lemongrass, coconut milk, curry spice mix, soy sauce, Chinese five spice and mustard all instantly enhance food and also have antioxidant and other health benefits.

Getting into good habits

Be aware of daily routines that could be a drain on your cash. Habitually buying that expensive take-away coffee or sandwich reduces the funds available for quality food. While we all need the odd treat, a home-prepared lunch is a lot cheaper and will do you more good than the usual high street offerings. Another money-saving investment is the thermos coffee cup. Saving that take-away coffee spend and using a flask instead could save around £500 a year¹⁷. Cutting back caffeinated drinks to, say, two cups a day will also benefit your health, as well as your pocket.

Think too about growing your own and wild harvesting. If you have a window sill you can grow fresh herbs; if you have a little patch of soil you can grow some salad or vegetables. Even if you can't grow your own, you could pick blackberries and other wild foods from unpolluted places. This doesn't only provide you with the freshest, most nutritious fruit and vegetables; it allows you to relax in the fresh air and feel a real sense of connection with your food and the cycle of the seasons.

Healthy Shopping on a Budget

Write a shopping list – and try to stick to it! It is always easy to be carried away and buy things you don't need and it is fatal to go shopping when you are feeling hungry. Shopping online means that you avoid such temptation but also takes away the opportunity to select fresh produce yourself.



Keep your head over special offers in supermarkets. "Two for one" and other deals can be good value, but think about how nutritious they are, whether you need them, what meals you could make with them and whether you might end up throwing half away.

Don't get swept off your feet by good-looking fruit and veg. Buying too much means it will spoil before you can eat it all. Buy fresh food every few days instead of weekly and go for cheaper vegetables, such as carrots and kale, which are delicious and packed with nutrients.



Talk to a butcher about cheaper cuts of meat, such as beef brisket or shoulder of lamb, which taste delicious slow-cooked. Organ meats, such as liver, kidneys and offal are densely nutrient-rich and can be mixed in with other cuts or with minced meat to make burgers and meatballs.

Choose sustainable and better value fish; for example, buying non-Mediterranean mackerel or non-trawled pollock is cheaper for you and better for the environment; see the website www.fishonline.org. Buying frozen fish can be cheaper and even fresher, as it is frozen immediately after being caught.



Buy seasonally and from the source – vegetables and fruit that are in season and locally grown are usually cheaper. Farmers' markets and local farm shops can connect us to both the source of the food we eat and its seasonality.

Buy foods that keep well in the freezer – berries, peas, fresh herbs and spinach can be bought ready-frozen and stored as healthy "back-up" foods; they can even retain more nutrients when frozen than when bought fresh¹⁸.



Pick your organic fruit and veg wisely – www.foodnews.org provides a guide to the 'Dirty Dozen' foods with the highest pesticide residues (apples and celery are top) and which are worth buying organic, as well as those generally safe to buy non-organically, such as onions and avocados.

Buy in bulk – some goods, such as nuts, beans and condiments, can be bought in larger amounts for cheaper unit prices, online from companies like www.healthysupplies.co.uk. Share orders with friends to ensure that easily spoiled produce like spices and nuts stays fresh.



The bottom line

Cutting costs need not mean cutting corners on the health benefits or pleasure that good food provides. If you have been caught in a bit of a shopping rut, planning to eat well on a budget can serve to bring out your dormant culinary imagination, as well as making you think about healthy food choices. It can also help you to discover new foods and new ways of cooking, or rediscover favourite meals from your childhood. Above all, spending less on food shouldn't mean feeling deprived or getting into a "poverty consciousness"; on the contrary, it can open the door to a more abundant, varied and naturally healthy diet. 🌱

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See pages 46 – 48 for references.