

Food on the Cheap

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When you're trying to save money in your food budget it can be tempting to opt for the value menu at a fast food joint rather than buying and cooking a healthy meal. And while it sometimes seems as if "healthy" and "cheap" are mutually exclusive concepts, there are ways to cut costs without sacrificing nutrition.

At the grocery store, experts recommend spending most of your time circling the periphery. "The whole, fresh foods tend to be around the edges, while the unhealthier—and often pricier—processed foods line the middle aisles," says Bethany Thayer, a registered dietician and spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association. Buying what's in season can also save you a bundle. Finding fresh tomatoes in the middle of winter is a pricey proposition, but come August, your local farmers will be practically giving them away. And summer fruit—like watermelon or cantaloupe—will give your diet a beta carotene and vitamin C boost at less than fifty cents per serving.

Here, the foods to add to your grocery list for healthy—not pricey—eating all year round.

Beans: This protein powerhouse gives you more nutritional bang for your buck than almost anything else you can buy. Black, pinto, garbanzo, lentil—they're all low in fat, packed with fiber and folic acid, and have some calcium, zinc and potassium. You can buy them dry or make your life easier by getting ready-to-serve cans—still a bargain at less than a dollar for enough to serve at least two. Mix beans into salads, stir them into soup or chili, or just heat a can and dump them over rice for a fast—not fat—food meal.

Eggs: At about a dollar a dozen, eggs also can't be beat when it comes to inexpensive protein—and not just at breakfast. Dietician Susan Moores suggests stirring a couple of beaten eggs into just-cooked pasta (the heat immediately cooks the eggs), then adding some fresh vegetables for a protein-rich pasta dinner.

Bananas: They're readily available regardless of season, and usually average about 60 to 70 cents a pound. And bananas are an easily portable source of fiber, potassium and vitamin B6. If you find them on sale, try freezing what you can't eat immediately, suggests Thayer. "Then take one out and use it in a smoothie to add great texture and extra nutrients without adding any fat," she says.

Brown rice: It's nearly as cheap as the white stuff, but because it still has the bran covering it (hence why it's called a "whole" grain), brown rice is much better for you. You get essential minerals—like magnesium and zinc—plus tons more fiber. A cup of white rice has less than 1 gram of fiber, while the brown variety packs 3.5 grams of the heart-healthy stuff.

Carrots: You'll pay a premium if you buy those uniform little baby carrots, but if you don't mind doing your own peeling and cutting, you can get a bag of these for under a

dollar. Try shredding them and adding them to a sandwich for extra crunch and a boost of fiber, beta carotene, potassium and vitamin C and B6.

Flank steak: Leaner cuts of red meat have less saturated fat and lots of good-for-you iron, zinc, protein and B vitamins. But these cheaper cuts also tend to be tough. So Moores suggests marinating the meat overnight in something acidic (a recipe that includes orange juice or vinegar, for example) to break apart the connective tissue and make the meat as tender and tasty as a much-pricier filet.

Sweet potatoes: Don't save these for Thanksgiving dinner! Sweet potatoes should find their way into your diet all year round. A giant spud can cost as little as a dollar or two, and it'll fill you up with significant amounts of beta carotene, potassium, fiber and calcium. Beyond the basic baked, try slicing them into "fries" and then roasting them in the oven in a pan with a little oil and salt.

Popcorn: The bucket you get at the movie theater is not only expensive, but it's loaded with unhealthy fat and sodium. But if you air-pop it at home, you get a cheap fat-free, fiber-rich snack.

Canned tuna: There's no denying that fish is good for your brain and your heart, but it can be a little tough on the budget. Cans of chunk light tuna are less expensive than albacore and deliver just as much omega-3 with less potentially harmful mercury. In addition to mixing it up for sandwiches (use healthier oil and vinegar instead of mayo), try tossing it into a tomato sauce or putting some on top of a salad.

Walnuts: Sure, nuts are high in fat, but it's the good, monounsaturated kind. Plus, walnuts are a great source of cholesterol-lowering omega-3 fatty acids. Choose the kind you shell yourself over a jar of ready-to-eat nuts and you'll save some cash.