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## **SHOPPING STRATEGIES FOR SAVING FOOD DOLLARS**

The focus on this last column is on You, the consumer. If you want to get serious about trimming your food dollar, then you have to look at your shopping behaviors. Since food is typically a big “slice” of the budget then it deserves some time and attention. These are proven strategies to use.

**HAVE A BUDGET.** Use the USDA tables as a guide to plan how much money to spend before going to the store. You can access them at <http://www.cnpp.usda.gov/USDAFoodPlansCostofFood.htm> Stick to your budget by bringing along a calculator to keep tab of your costs.

**KEEP RECORDS.** Save your receipts so you can record how much you’ve spent and compare prices of commonly purchased items. For the industrious, make yourself an Excel spreadsheet. As you become more aware of price differences, then you can stock up when you visit the store with the best prices or items are on sale.

**PLAN AHEAD.** Plan your meals in advance to make a shopping list. How often do we go into the store for one specific item and come out with 30 things we never planned to buy. There is fierce competition between local retailers which is why they try to lure us inside and play background music to make us want to stay. Research shows that for every minute you spend in the grocery store you’re spending increases.

**EAT FIRST.** Don’t shop when you’re tired or hungry, and go alone. Studies show that when people grocery shop when they are hungry, rushed, or with kids, they spend more.

**READ THE SHELVES.** Compare brands. Store or generic brands are usually less costly and just as nutritious. Use shelf pricing to compare costs. Remember that largest size is not always the cheapest per pound/unit. Research documented in the book *Mindless Eating* reports that most people cannot pick out a brand once it is out of the package.

**NOTICE WHAT YOU DON'T EAT.** Tape a paper to the fridge, date it, and record what you throw out. It’s shocking! This practice alone could save you hundreds of dollars and change

your habits. By keeping records you will identify foods that you are over purchasing. When I did this I found I consistently threw away luncheon meats which are not inexpensive. I buy much less now and if I run out, tuna and peanut butter and jelly are my sandwich fillings.

***BUY IN BULK.*** If family size dictates that you need large quantities, then you may benefit from warehouse stores. Don't always assume the warehouse is cheaper. If you compare prices you might find the same item for less as a store brand. Annual membership fees are required to shop at these stores so you have to go there enough to justify the fee.

One caution about shopping at warehouse stores is the package size. You can't buy a standard box of ten granola bars. It's more like 48 bars so you have to be sure your family accepts the product before you get stuck with four dozen of them!

***CLIP COUPONS.*** Clip coupons for menu items you normally buy, remembering that coupons save dollars only on the products one needs. Otherwise they just cause impulse buying. For some individuals the "thrill" of saving becomes the motivation. There is an entire television show devoted to "couponsing," realize this can take considerable time and organizational skills.

I watched the show and observed that many of the products accrued with coupons are NOT nutrient dense and would not be on my shopping list anyway. Free or cheap food is not cheap if it leads to overweight and health issues. You have to consider the medical and prescription costs you will have if you develop diabetes, high blood pressure, or other health concerns.

***SHOP THE SALES & STOCK UP.*** Know the regular price of items you buy often so you'll know a sale when you see it and can stock up.

***USE UP WHAT'S IN THE PANTRY/FREEZER.*** No one will die if you run out of something for a few days and the goal is not to have spoiled food that must be discarded. Make use of what's on hand and resist running to the store for just one item. Utilize foods stored in the back of the pantry or freezer. Be sure to check expiration dates.

***ENERGY.*** Saving on your food budget does not stop when you leave the store. Remember to factor in the cost of energy to prepare and store food. If possible, cook food in a toaster oven, electric skillet, and/or microwave instead of using the range which uses much more energy.

University of Maryland Extension is committed to help consumers with food budgeting during these challenging economic times. To schedule a workshop for your workplace, church, or community group contact our office at 301-600-1599.

Try making these recipes at home to save on meals:

### **VEGETABLE PASTA ITALIANO**

1/2 pound lean ground beef or turkey  
1 red bell pepper, seeded and thinly sliced  
1 tablespoon paprika  
1 can (14 1/2 oz) crushed tomatoes

1 can (14 1/2 oz) reduced-sodium chicken broth OR 1 chicken bouillon cube dissolved in  
1 1/2 cups water  
2 cups uncooked bow-tie pasta  
2 cups broccoli florets, washed  
1 cup cauliflower florets, washed

### *SAVORY TOPPING*

1/2 bunch parsley  
1/4 cup seasoned dry bread crumbs  
1/4 cup grated Parmesan cheese

Crumble ground beef into a skillet. Brown over medium-high heat for 2 minutes, stirring occasionally. Add red pepper strips and paprika, cook for 2 more minutes. Add crushed tomatoes, chicken broth, and pasta to the skillet. Bring mixture to a boil, reduce heat, cover and simmer for 15 minutes. Remove the lid and arrange broccoli and cauliflower over the pasta. Replace lid and continue cooking for 10 minutes. Prepare the savory topping. Pull leaves from parsley stems and combine with bread crumbs and grated cheese, toss. Sprinkle topping over vegetables in skillet. Let sit for 3 minutes before serving.

### **CROCKPOT SCALLOPED POTATOES**

2 pounds potatoes (about 6 medium)  
1 small onion, thinly sliced  
1/4 cup flour  
1 teaspoon salt  
1/4 teaspoon pepper  
2 tablespoons butter  
1 (10 3/4- ounce) can cream of mushroom soup  
4 slices American cheese or Cheddar cheese

Pare and thinly slice potatoes. Toss slices in 1 cup water and 1/2 teaspoon cream of tartar. Drain. Put half of sliced potatoes in greased crock-pot. Top with half of onion slices, flour, salt and pepper. Add remaining sliced potatoes and onions. Sprinkle with remaining flour. Add butter and undiluted soup. Cover and cook on Low 7 to 9 hours. (High: 3 to 4 hours). Add cheese slices 30 minutes before serving. (Recipe may be doubled for the 5-quart model).

### ***CABBAGE FRUIT SALAD***

2 cups finely shredded green cabbage (about 1 small head)  
1 can (8 ounces) crushed pineapple in juice, drained  
2 medium apples, chopped (about 2 cups)  
1 cup seedless red or green grapes  
1 cup plain yogurt  
1/3 cup mayonnaise or salad dressing  
1 tablespoon packed brown sugar  
1/4 teaspoon salt

Mix cabbage, pineapple, apples and grapes. Mix remaining ingredients; toss with cabbage mixture until evenly coated. Makes 6 servings.

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