SPENDING LESS EATING BETTER

Is your grocery bill taking too much of the family budget? Monthly, USDA publishes tables on what it costs to eat based on all meals and snacks that are purchased at stores and prepared at home. These tables, *Official USDA Food Plans: Cost of Food at Home at Four Levels, U.S. Average*, are revised monthly to reflect increased costs using the consumer price index for specific food items. These tables can be accessed through the website for the USDA Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion at http://www.cnpp.usda.gov/usda-food-plans-cost-food-report-december-2014

Prices for a family of four with two children ages 6-8 and 9-11 years based on tables for December 2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plan</th>
<th>Monthly Cost</th>
<th>Yearly Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thrifty plan</td>
<td>$ 655</td>
<td>$ 7860</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low-cost plan</td>
<td>$ 862</td>
<td>$ 10,344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate-cost plan</td>
<td>$ 1073</td>
<td>$ 12,876</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal plan</td>
<td>$ 1,303</td>
<td>$ 15,636</td>
</tr>
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Comparison of costs from almost a decade ago reveals food costs have risen 23% in every single category, except the thrifty plan which rose by 21%. Since we can’t control the rising prices, what can you do to make the most of your food dollars?

*HAVE A BUDGET.* Use the USDA tables as a guide to plan how much money to spend before you go to the store. Stick to your budget by bringing along a calculator or using your cell phone as one to keep tab of your costs.

*KEEP RECORDS.* Save your receipts so you can record how much you’ve spent and compare prices of your most commonly purchased items. Typical items are milk, juice, bread, cheese, cereal, bananas, apples, eggs, pasta, chicken and ground beef. Learn methods for freezing these items so you can buy them in bulk or on sale. Bread can be frozen for sandwiches and French toast, cheese can be shredded and frozen for future cooking. Even bananas can be frozen (see our recipe).
**PLAN AHEAD.** Plan your meals in advance and make a shopping list to avoid buying unnecessary items. Check the pantry first to see what’s on hand and the store flyers to determine what items are on sale before shopping.

**READ THE SHELVES.** Compare brands. Store brands and generic brands are usually less costly but just as nutritious. Don’t assume the largest size is the cheapest per pound/unit. Use your shelf pricing to compare costs between package sizes. If you end up throwing the item away because you have too much to use before it goes bad, then it’s not a deal.

**NOTICE WHAT YOU DON’T EAT.** Record what you throw out so you can adjust your shopping habits. Research shows an average family of four in the US waste $1,560 on food not eaten. That is literally throwing money away and think what you could do with an extra $1,560 in your pocket. Start today and put a post-it note or piece of paper on the fridge to write down what goes in the trash bin and why you didn’t use it. After a short while you may see some patterns. Maybe you need only a half a pound of lunch meat and you never get around to eating those fresh greens that you keep buying. It’s hard to remember what you eat, much less what you throw out, so make it easy to keep track.

I am NOT encouraging you to eat spoiled food! If you are ever in doubt it’s better to throw something out than to risk an episode of food poisoning. University of Maryland Extension can provide you guidelines on how long different foods can be kept. For information contact our office at 301-600-1599, Family & Consumer Sciences.

**BUY IN BULK.** Shop at warehouse stores if you have need for large quantities. Keep track of costs so you can compare to the store sales. Don’t assume the warehouse is always cheaper. One caution is if you purchase a new item and you don’t like it you’ll be stuck with multiple servings of it. Warehouse stores offer only a limited number of brands and items so be sure they sell the brands you like.

**CLIP COUPONS.** Clip coupons for menu items you normally buy. Remember coupons save dollars only on those products one needs. Otherwise they just cause impulse buying on foods you don’t really need/use. You can get coupons from your local weekend newspaper, on the web and many supermarkets and drug stores mail coupons to regular shoppers.

**SHOP THE SALES & STOCK UP.** Know the regular price of items you buy often so you’ll know a sale when you see it. Stock up on items when they are on sale. Look at the in store flyer for any store specials.

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

**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 throw away spoiled milk, moldy bread, wilted vegetables. Make yourself use what’s on hand. It’s better to pay a little more to go to the corner convenience store for milk when you actually need it. Research shows that for every minute you spend in the
You go in for 3 items and come out with 30...you know the picture.

Pick a certain time of the year or certain day of the week to use up those foods stored back in the pantry or freezer. We all have them. I do it in the summer and restock in the fall when the new school year begins. This is a good time to check your expiration dates to make sure things get used before they go bad. If you have a question about a product shelf life contact the food manufacturer or University of Maryland Frederick County Office at 301-600-1599.

SAVE ON ENERGY. Remember to factor in the cost of energy to prepare and store foods. A refrigerator bought ten or more years ago uses a third more energy than today’s models. Foods can be cooked in a small appliance (microwave, electric skillet, crock pot) for a fraction of the energy needed to operate a stove. Invest in a good model which will quickly pay for itself when you consider the range takes 25 times more energy to use than a toaster oven. Check first with Consumer Reports to find out what models work best.

REMEMBER WHAT YOUR TIME IS WORTH. We all have demanding jobs, regardless if we are at home raising families, or have a job outside the home. Give yourself permission to use some convenience items to make mealtimes manageable. It’s not realistic to think you can prepare everything from scratch. Use our recipe for master mix instead of Bisquick to make biscuits, muffins, pancakes, and waffles which can save you both time and money over store bought mixes.

LOOK FOR RECIPES. The University of Maryland Eat Smart, Be Fit Maryland! has a great website www.eatsmart.umd.edu with hundreds of nutritious, cost saving recipes right at your fingertips. There are videos and a blog with pictorial recipes to guide those new to the kitchen. Our local libraries in Frederick County offers a variety of cookbooks.

BASIC MASTER MIX
5 cups all-purpose flour
4 cups whole wheat flour
1/3 cup baking powder
1/2 cup non-fat dry milk
2 cups shortening

Combine flour, baking powder, and dry milk; sift together. Cut in shortening until mixture resembles coarse cornmeal. Store in covered container in cool place. Makes 12 cups.

HOT, FRESH BISCUITS
3 cups Master Mix
2/3 cup milk

WAFFLES
2 cups Master Mix
2 eggs
2 tablespoons oil
1 1/4 cup milk

Mix all ingredients together. Bake in preheated waffle iron.

ORANGE PANCAKES
2 cups Master Mix
3 tablespoons sugar
1 large egg
3/4 cup orange juice
3/4 cup milk
Sunshine Orange Sauce

Combine Master Mix and sugar in a large bowl; make a well in center of mixture.

Combine egg, orange juice, and milk in a small bowl, stirring well; add to dry ingredients, stirring just until moistened.

Pour 1/4 cup batter for each pancake onto a hot, lightly greased griddle. Cook pancakes until tops are covered with bubbles and edges appear cooked; turn and cook other side. Serve with Sunshine Orange Sauce. Makes 14 (4-inch) pancakes.

Sunshine Orange Sauce
1/4 cup sugar
1 tablespoon cornstarch
3/4 cup orange juice

Bring all ingredients to a boil in a small saucepan over medium heat, stirring constantly; boil 1 minute. Serve warm. Makes 3/4 cup.

SAUCE MIX FOR CREAM SOUP
Makes 3 cups mix = 9 cans condensed cream soup

2 cups instant nonfat dry milk
3/4 cup cornstarch
1/4 cup low sodium chicken bouillon granules
2 tablespoons dehydrated onion flakes
1 teaspoon crushed dry basil leaves
1 teaspoon crushed dry thyme leaves
1/2 teaspoon ground black pepper
Combine all ingredients; mix well. Store in an airtight container at room temperature.
Nutritional Analysis Per 1/3 Cup Mix = 1 can cream soup: Calories 141; total fat 0.2g; saturated fat 0.1g; cholesterol 5mg; sodium 144mg; calcium 341mg.

**To substitute for 1 can of cream soup:** In a saucepan, combine 1/3 cup sauce mix and 1¼ cups cold water. Stir with whisk over low to medium heat until mixture thickens. Add thickened mixture to recipe as you would a can of soup.

**Uses:** This mix works in any casserole or skillet recipe calling for condensed cream soup. Can also be used as a base for gravy served over mashed potatoes, rice, or noodles. Add 1 cup grated cheese to thickened soup for a cheese sauce. Add tomato sauce to thickened soup for a cream of tomato soup or use as a spaghetti topping.

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