

## Does Healthy Eating Really Cost More?

Time and time again, I've heard the excuse, "It's too expensive to eat healthy!". As a dietitian, former starving grad student, family cook/shopper and self-proclaimed bargain-hunter-extraordinaire, I can't take that as an excuse! I will admit that, yes, it is a fact...food prices are indeed rising...and the price of many nutrient-dense, good-for-you foods are rising faster than the prices of many fatty junk foods. What's the health conscious consumer to do?

Here are a few tips:

1. **STAY AWAY FROM FAST FOOD RESTAURANTS AND CONVENIENCE STORES:** College students often lead busy, stressful lives, but many don't realize how much extra they are paying (health-wise and money-wise) for the junk that is sold at fast food restaurants and convenience stores. Here's an alternative for when you're in a hurry: Instead of paying close to 6 bucks on a "healthy" grilled chicken sandwich value meal at McDonalds, spend less than 1/2 of that (\$2.66 to be exact) on a much healthier (and fresher) "fast food" meal from HEB. Get a fresh roll from the bakery and 2 slices turkey from the deli (don't forget to ask for the free mustard) to make a sandwich. Add an apple, a yogurt, and a bottle of water – fast, healthy, and at a price of \$2.66, costs less than half of a traditional "fast food" meal. You can get 2 of those "tuna lunch kits" (tuna, crackers, light mayo and relish) for \$1.89. Add a yogurt smoothie and a piece of fruit for a bit more to round out your meal. If you must patronize a fast food place, try a convenience store, but buy something with nutrients your body can use, like low fat milk, low fat chocolate milk, a packet of nuts, a low fat yogurt drink, string cheese, or cereal/nutrition bars. Buy just enough to tide you over until you can get home, or somewhere where you can get a decently priced, nutritious meal. If you're out and about at meal time, and feel the need to go to a fast food from a restaurant, try to skip the fries and soda (they're charging you 4 times what they paid for those items). Again, get just enough to tide you over!
2. **SPEND MONEY WISELY ON FRUITS AND VEGETABLES:** A diet rich in fruits and vegetables can promote health and help prevent diseases...but the prices of fresh produce are rising! Choose what's in season. My personal rule of them: \$1.29/per pound or less. Recently there were at least 6 choices of fruits and vegetables from which to choose in this price range. Buying fruits in a bag is cheaper than individually. Here's an example: recently, a 5 pound bag of apples at HEB cost 4.99; individually, they cost \$1.49/pound. Buying the 5# bag was \$2.46 cheaper than buying 5 pounds of apples individually. Can't eat 5 pounds of apples before they go bad? Split the cost (and apples) with a friend. Remember that frozen fruits and vegetables are just as nutritious as the fresh ones...and often cheaper. Save money by stocking up on the frozen ones when they are sale. Use frozen fruits as an "ice pack" to keep your brown-bag lunch cool throughout the morning. They'll be partially thawed and yummy by lunch time. Use frozen fruits to make a delicious morning smoothie. Add frozen veggies to an inexpensive can of soup while you are heating it up.
3. **BUY CHEAPER PROTEIN SOURCES:** Protein is an important part of a healthy diet. Many people think "meat" or "steak" when they think "protein". Per gram, the cheapest sources of protein are canned beans, canned tuna, eggs, milk, and peanut butter, respectively. Buy these nutritious protein sources more often and lean meats only on occasion to save money.
4. **SWITCH TO WATER:** A 12 pack of Coke or Diet Coke (neither of which are essential to a healthy diet) puts you back \$3.79; you pay about 3 cents per ounce of soda. If you

buy a 12 pack every other week (which is less than 1 can of soda a day) you are spending almost \$100/year on something your body doesn't even need! Switch to tap water; bottled isn't proven to be any healthier. If you insist on a flavored beverage, consider Crystal Light for 1 cent per ounce (when mixed), or Wyler's and HEB's equivalent for about ½ cent per oz.

5. USE RECIPES WITH INEXPENSIVE INGREDIENTS: The “recipe finder database” of the Food Stamp Nutrition Connection at [www.recipefinder.nal.usda.gov](http://www.recipefinder.nal.usda.gov) allows you to look up nutritious recipes by price. See what healthy entrees you can find for under \$3.00/serving!
6. DON'T FORGET CANOLA OIL: Olive oil is touted as a “healthy fat” and it is, but canola oil is heart healthy too – it has monounsaturated fat and omega 3 fatty acids, both of which have health benefits. One big difference between olive oil and canola oil? The price! Canola oil is cheaper!
7. CONSIDER COUPONS: I recommend starting out simple: before you shop, you can see what's on special at HEB by going to [www.heb.com](http://www.heb.com) and entering your zip code. Then, consider checking out some coupon sites online. I use [www.coupons.com](http://www.coupons.com). Sometimes, the coupons correspond with the “on sale” items for greater savings. Don't forget to read the yellow coupons hanging on the shelves at HEB; these offer a wide variety of savings and often free products (I recently got a free quart of sherbet with my purchase of frozen Lean Cuisine meals!) Also check coupons on the back of your receipt; they are tailored to the foods you already buy.
8. KEEP IT ALL IN PERSPECTIVE: Remember what a “healthy diet” really is. A healthy diet emphasizes a variety of whole grains, fruits and veggies, and includes some low fat dairy and lean meats/protein sources. Sure pretzels or baked chips are more “heart healthy” and have fewer calories than fried chips or lard-laden cinnamon rolls, but the fact of the matter is, none of these are essential for a healthy diet. If you are really concerned about the cost of a healthy diet, don't waste your money (and your health) on these things! Yes, baked chips may be “better for you” than regular chips, and yes, they do cost more than the fatty ones, but they are NOT absolutely necessary for a healthy diet. The same goes for most prepared, pre-packaged snack items, bottled water, soda, candy and alcohol. If you are really watching your pennies, save the \$3.79 that you would have spent on a bag of baked chips (that aren't essential for your healthy diet) and spend it on some fresh or frozen produce that *is* essential!

Remember that a healthy diet is an important investment. Hopefully, saving some money with the tips mentioned above will allow you to spend a little more on foods with a greater nutrition “pay off”, like fruits, veggies, whole grains, low fat dairy, and lean meats. Prioritize your health – spend a bit more on a healthy diet than on non-essentials like manicures/pedicures, extra cell phone features, stereo accessories, etc. Putting nutrition high on your priority list now may prevent you from paying astronomical medical bills in the future (like those for bypass surgery or cancer treatment!). Invest in a healthy diet today - your current and future health depends on it!