



# Dinner On A Dollar

**Y**ou can prepare appealing and nutritious meals and stay within your budget, too. With proper planning, careful shopping and basic food preparation knowledge, you can please your family and save money.

First, look at your food habits. Do you eat on the run, stopping at fast food restaurants or convenience stores? Do you purchase convenience foods regularly—such as frozen main meal dinners, single-serving products, frozen or prepared cakes or pastries, cooked whole chickens and deli foods? Do you eat out or order in often (pizza, for example)? Total your monthly spending on these items and you'll be surprised how much money you're spending on food.

Even though convenience foods can make life a little easier by saving time, a dollar here and a dollar there adds up quickly. To truly have dinner on a dollar you will have to prepare most of your meals at home using very few convenience items.

## Menu Planning

The *Food Guide Pyramid* should be the basis of your menu planning. Wise food choices include plant foods high in protein and complex carbohydrates such as legumes (dried beans and peas), grains (breads, pasta, rice) and nuts and seeds (peanuts, sunflower seeds). Add milk, dairy products or an animal source for a high quality protein combination. Add fruits and vegetables throughout the day

and you have learned how to eat healthier **and** save money, too. Follow the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* by consuming a variety of foods in moderation. Pay close attention to your consumption of fat, sugar and sodium.

If possible, prepare menus two weeks at a time. A variety of cooking methods, colors, textures and temperatures should be utilized while incorporating family preferences. Select recipes with short preparation and cooking times—such as stir-fry dishes, fish, salads and stews. Be creative by trying new recipes. Traditional breakfast foods can be served for dinner. Vegetarian meals can also be included several times per week. Leftovers can be used to create new meals, casseroles and sandwiches. Always follow food safety guidelines whenever reheating is involved. Seasonal fruits and vegetables are the best buy. Plan some meals around grocery weekly specials.

## Food Buying

Once menu plans are made, a shopping list should be made based on the recipes you are going to use. Check your pantry, refrigerator and freezer so you can use on-hand items first. Attach the appropriate coupons to your list as a handy reference when comparing brand and generic foods. Generally, store brands are less expensive than national brands with some taste variations. Nutritional values are often comparable. Read the label, especially if you have health considerations such as sodium restrictions. Thrift stores and buying in bulk may save you money on often used items.

Meat is probably the most expensive food purchase we make. Purchase larger cuts of beef that can be cut into smaller portions and used for several meals. A whole bottom beef that can be cut into smaller portions and used for several meals. A whole bottom round will yield a rump roast, eye of round roast and ground beef. A chuck blade roast can be divided into two ribeye steaks, strips for stir frying, cubes for beef stew or kabobs, a pot roast or ground beef. A pork loin roast can be sliced into pork chops, ribs for barbecuing or remove the bones for a boneless roast. Fix one for dinner and freeze the remainder. Whole chickens can be a good buy if you intend to use all of the parts. Most cookbooks illustrate how to cut a whole chicken into parts and how to debone chicken breasts. If you do not plan to use all parts of the chicken, look for parts on sale. Organ meats, such as the liver, kidney and heart are inexpensive and nutritious. Canned tuna and pink salmon, as well as fresh whiting and ocean perch, are inexpensive protein sources. Dry beans, peas, peanut butter and eggs are good low-cost meat substitutes.

To get the most for your nutrition dollar, milk and dairy products should be chosen with fat content in mind. Buy less whole milk, cream, butter and ice cream and more skim milk, margarine and ice milk. Choose lower-fat versions of cheeses, cottage cheese and yogurt. Purchase nonfat dry milk solids and reconstitute for cooking only. (Nonfat dry milk will keep for up to six months on the shelf.) Purchase blocks and wedges of cheese to grate and cube yourself.

Bakery outlets are a source of day-old bread products which can cost less than fresh. Consider baking your own breads. Bulk packaging of cereals and pastas may be the answer if you consume a lot of these foods. Remember that instant and ready-to-eat cereals are more expensive than they are in their natural form. Compare the cost of presweetened with unsweetened cereals.

Fresh fruits and vegetables begin to lose their nutritional value as soon as they are

picked—so buy only what you will eat within a few days. In-season items are usually cheaper. Pre-packaged items may be more expensive. If items are out-of-season, compare to frozen and canned for the best buy. Compare prices of larger bags of frozen vegetables to smaller boxed or canned vegetables. With the frozen variety, you can remove small amounts at a time and save the rest for later. Avoid microwaveable vegetables in their own box. You can just as easily use your own container with less expense. Reduced-price produce can be a good buy **only** if you use the items quickly and there is no evidence of decay. "You pick" farms may offer reduced prices on fruits and vegetables. Or, grow your own as food processing may also be cheaper.

## Meal Preparation

Organize your kitchen to make your minutes count. Place equipment close to where you'll actually use it. Use time-saving appliances, such as a microwave, blender or pressure cooker. Bake more than one food item at a time, such as cookies and a casserole. Avoid using extra dishes. When possible, mix the casserole ingredients in the baking dish or when making muffins, combine the milk, egg and oil in the measuring cup used to measure the milk.

Serve one-dish meals several times a week. Most covered casseroles can be refrigerated up to 24 hours or frozen for up to three months. Allow extra time for baking. Serve simple, yet hearty two-course meals such as a meat and vegetable main dish with a salad, fruit or dessert or a hearty stew with bread, salad or fruit.

Make your own low-cost substitutes. Stretch a meal by adding oatmeal, dry crushed cereals, bread crumbs, vegetables, pasta or rice to ground beef, chopped meat, fish or hard-cooked eggs. Substitute canned tuna for crab, shrimp or lobster in mixed dishes. Regular ground beef is cheaper than extra lean beef. Drain the excess fat after cooking and rinse with water. Reuse leftover vegetables, pasta,

rice and meat for casseroles and soups but follow food safety guidelines when reheating or storing.

Finally, get the family involved with preparing and serving the meals by sharing the responsibilities. Make it a learning experience that will be fun for everyone.

**By Sandra Bastin, Ph.D., R.D., L.D.  
Extension Food & Nutrition Specialist**