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Tough times in grocery aisles

How do you cut your grocery bill and follow a healthy diet?

The nation's unemployment rate might be slowing, but it's still increasing at an unacceptably high rate. And even those still working are looking for ways to cut back on expenses.

So is it possible to eat a nutritious diet even in a recession?

Too many people don't know the answer. Too often, cheap, filling but nutritionally poor food choices are the preferred way to cut costs.

There are ways to cut back while eating right.

Every day Dora Montgomery talks to people who need to know how to eat right on a limited budget.

Dora is a bilingual social worker and a member of CareOregon's Maternal Moms Team. (CareOregon is the largest health plan for Oregon Health Plan members, including about 17,000 Oregonians who speak Spanish as their first language.)

It is the mission of the team to make sure babies get the best possible start in life. And that means giving wise answers when mothers have questions about nutrition.

The basic answers apply to everyone, not just mothers, Dora says. And with a little planning, following a less expensive, more nutritious diet is possible.

Dora is available to take calls from the media on this subject Monday thru Thursday from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Please call Jeanie Lunsford to make arrangements.

Make a plan before you shop

1. **What can you spend?** Keep track of all your food expenses for a week. That will give you a place to start to build a budget, Dora says. If you need to cut back on cost, plan to eat more at home. The same plan will work if you want a healthier diet, especially if you're cutting back on fast-food restaurants.
2. **What are your resources?** Many low-income Oregonians qualify for food stamps and haven't applied for them, Dora says. And pregnant women and babies can qualify for vouchers from WIC.
3. **Have you stocked up on staples?** Staples are food items that won't go bad when you store them. They include flour, masa/corn meal, sugar, dry milk, canned or dried beans, canned tuna, chilies, rice, pasta, spice, salt and peanut butter. You can save money by buying staples in bulk.
4. **What perishables should you purchase?** Perishables will spoil if you keep them too long, such as fresh fruit and vegetables, eggs, meat and dairy products. You'll need to eat these within a few days after buying them.
5. **What should you buy?** Take an inventory of what you have so you don't buy too much. Check your weekly store ads for foods that are on sale, in season or both. Then plan your family meals around what's on sale or in season. Make a list and stick to it.

Follow a shopping strategy at the store

1. **Pick your store.** If you can buy a large amount and store it, warehouse stores will save you money. Consider teaming up with a friend or two to buy in bulk and split it among you. Outlet stores sell everything at a discount. Check the advertisements to find out where the things on your list might be on sale. Don't forget farmers' markets. The produce there is the freshest, and most markets accept WIC vouchers.
2. **Eat first.** Don't shop on an empty stomach. You'll buy things you don't need, like that pizza that smells so good right next to the entrance.
3. **Stick to your list.** It's OK to buy things that are on sale and that you really do need. But for the most part, buying only things that are on your list keeps your expenses down and your purchase of nutritious foods up.
4. **Shop the outside.** Whole foods, such as fruits, vegetables, bread, fresh meat and dairy products, are typically located around the outside of a grocery store. These are the foods that are healthiest for you, and are generally less expensive than the packaged food on the shelves near the center of the store.

5. **Choose wisely.** It's healthier, less expensive or both to: choose bulk food rather than packaged food, whole food you fix yourself rather than ready-to-eat packaged food, and generic or store-brand products rather than brand-name. Remember that the more packaging there is, the more expensive it will be. Single-serving packaging costs more than regular-sized packaging.
6. **Read the labels.** The nutrition labels on the food package can tell you how much fat, sugar, fiber and salt are in the food. And the price labels on the shelves will give you a unit price (how much per ounce or serving) so you can tell which brands actually costs less.
7. **Be careful about coupons.** "A lot of times, coupons are only good for brand-name, prepared foods," Dora says. "The generic or store brands might be just as inexpensive as the brand name you get with a coupon. And most of the time, the food you prepare yourself is healthier and less expensive."

Know your healthy diet choices

To really follow a healthy diet, you can follow the recommendations that are shown on the Food Guide Pyramid. You can get a copy in English at www.mypyramid.gov or in Spanish at mypyramid.gov/sp-index.html.

Here are some general rules of thumb based on a 2,000-calorie-per-day diet for an adult. Your own diet may be different based on your health, height, gender and the amount of exercise you get each day.

- **Grain.** You should get about six ounces of grain each day, and about half of it should be whole grain. Whole grain gives you important fiber and other nutrients that you don't get in processed grain. Whole grains include brown rice, bulgur, graham flour, oatmeal, whole-grain corn, whole oats, whole rye, whole wheat, wild rice, corn tortillas, whole wheat tortillas, and whole grain bread (read the label because many kinds of brown bread are not whole grain).

You can get about one ounce of whole grain in one slice of whole-grain bread, 1 cup of ready-to-eat cereal or one-half cup of cooked brown rice, pasta or hot cereal.

To save money on grains: Buy bread on sale and keep the extra loaves in the freezer; store rice and grains in tightly closed containers; get regular rice rather than instant rice; remember that the more packaging there is, the more expensive it is. Single-serving packets of oatmeal cost more than the same amount of bulk oatmeal.

- **Vegetables.** Most Americans don't eat the 2.5 cups of vegetables they should get every day. Pick a variety because different kinds of vegetables have different kinds of nutrients. Be sure to buy only as many fresh vegetables as your family can eat in a few days.

If you buy fresh vegetables when they are in season, they will be the freshest and have the best price. And they're more likely to be locally grown. In the off season, you can buy canned and frozen vegetables in bulk and store them.

- **Fruit.** You should have about two cups a day. But count one-half cup of dried fruit as the same as one whole cup of fresh fruit. And when you buy juice, look for “100 percent juice” on the label. “Juice cocktails” and “juice drinks” have added sugar, flavorings and water. Even with 100 percent juice, you shouldn't have only juice for your fruit because juice doesn't have important fiber that you need.
- **Dairy.** Dairy is a great source of calcium that you need. And women especially need calcium. Adults should have the equivalent of 3 cups of dairy per day; children 2 to 8 years of age should have 2 cups. Children under age 2 should drink whole milk, but for adults and children older than 2, low-fat or non-fat is a better choice.

You can also have other dairy products. One cup of milk is equal to one cup of yogurt, 1.5 ounces of hard cheese, 2 ounces of processed cheese, and 2 cups of cottage cheese. But be careful. These other products tend to be higher in fat and high in salt.

Many people are “lactose intolerant” and have digestion problems if they drink milk. There are soy milk and rice milk substitutes that can supply the nutrients you get in dairy.

- **Meat and Beans.** Adults should eat about 5.5 ounces a day. A three-ounce serving of meat, poultry or fish is about the size of a deck of playing cards. One-half ounce of seeds or nuts, one tablespoon of peanut butter, and one-quarter cup of cooked beans are all about the same as one ounce of meat.

To save money, you can buy whole turkeys or chickens when they are on sale and freeze them. Dried beans and peas also store well and can be bought in bulk.

Remember that prepared meats—such as deli meats, hot dogs, bologna, bacon and chorizo—are high in fat and sodium.

- **Fats:** You need some fat in a healthy diet, but most Americans get far too much. Try to avoid saturated fats, which are in cheese, whole milk, cream, butter fatty meat, lard, palm oil and coconut oil; and trans fats, which are found in stick margarine and snack foods. The healthiest fats are unsaturated fats, which are liquid at room temperature.
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About CareOregon

CareOregon is a non-profit health plan that serves Oregonians who have Medicare and Medicaid, including about one quarter of Oregon Health Plan participants. Its mission is to help all Oregonians have quality, culturally appropriate health care, even in these times when health care is hard to afford. CareOregon works with its members and its network of providers so members can live healthier lives and have high-quality, affordable, effective health care whenever they need it, now and in the future. About 34 percent of CareOregon's more than 100,000 members do not speak English as a first language. Spanish is the most common non-English first language among CareOregon members, followed by Russian and Vietnamese. For more information, see www.careoregon.org/.

CareOregon's CareSupport Program includes the Maternal Moms Team. CareSupport staff includes teams of registered nurse case managers, behavioral health case managers, health care guides (social workers) and clinical pharmacists who help members with medical issues that need more than average care. CareSupport helps these members and more:

- Pregnant women who are on methadone.
- Mothers who have recently had a baby.
- People with both Medicaid and Medicare.
- Patients with chronic illness like congestive heart failure, asthma, COPD (chronic lung disease) or diabetes.
- Patients going to a skilled nursing facility or home after being in the hospital.
- Patients in the hospital for mental health reasons.

Information about good nutrition is available to anyone who has access to the Internet from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). The USDA's "My Pyramid" web site (in English, www.mypyramid.gov, and in Spanish, mypyramid.gov/sp-index.html) gives guidelines for nutrition based on the most recent research about health and food.

Local WIC offices. Find an office for the WIC nutritional assistance program for mothers and infant children by calling 1-800-723-3638 or by checking the state web site, www.oregon.gov/DHS/ph/wic/countyinfo.shtml.

Farmers' markets. Find a directory of farmers' markets in Oregon at www.oregonfarmersmarkets.org/directory.html or anywhere in the country at apps.ams.usda.gov/FarmersMarkets/?wpisrc=newsletter. The Oregon directory also gives information about WIC and the Senior Farm Direct Nutrition Program.

For information on food stamps:

- Families and single adults without a disability contact their local DHS self-sufficiency office, www.oregon.gov/DHS/localoffices/locations.shtml.
- Seniors and people with disabilities contact a Seniors & People with Disabilities or Area Agencies on Aging office, www.oregon.gov/DHS/spwpd/offices.shtml.
- For more information on how and where to apply for food stamps, call Oregon SafeNet, 1-800-723-3638.