

Keeping Your Food Dollar \$ in Check

As everything from utilities and gas to household staples increase in price, many people want to know how they can make their dollar go further. One of the things we can do to alleviate the strain of rising food costs is to shop smart. Here are some simple tips that can help you save money and make your food dollar go further.

- **Make a grocery list.**

One of the most important things you can do as a smart consumer is to keep a list of items you need to buy at the store. Make sure to keep this in an accessible location such as on your refrigerator. This will help you avoid impulse buys like unnecessary and expensive snacks. This will also allow you to save on gas by going to the grocery store less often, preferably once per week. Make sure to take the list with you to the store, stick to it, but remain flexible as you might find a great sale. To help you remain on track regarding your grocery list, avoid shopping when tired or hungry because this may cause unnecessary, unhealthy choices.

- **Compare prices.**

Most stores have different brands of the same product for different prices, so compare consider bringing a small, handheld calculator to ensure that you are getting the most food for your money. Often store brand items are the cheapest. Also, consider buying items in bulk although this may not be the most cost efficient option; so calculate the unit price first. Look for the best buy in the size you can use before it expires and make sure you have storage room if you purchase items in bulk.

- **Check advertisements and coupons.**

Before going to the store, make sure to check the advertisements for weekly specials and coupons. Typically, you can find these in the Sunday newspaper or even online. Don't purchase items you wouldn't normally buy simply because you have a coupon or because it is a good deal. A great way to increase your savings is to plan meals around sale items, and stock up on staples when they are discounted providing you have adequate storage space. For instance, if ground beef is on sale one week, buy extra to make a few meals with it and then freeze the excess for a later date; or if bread is "buy one get one free", purchase extra and freeze for future use.

- **Reduce Excess**

Make it a point to buy only what you need, because excess food will only go to waste. If you have leftovers try to eat them within in a day or two or place in the freezer right away to avoid spoilage. Keep an eye on expiration dates so you won't have to throw food away. Food gone bad is like tossing money in the trash, so plan ahead to avoid throwing food away.

- **Eat Out Less**

Choosing to pack a lunch or cook at home rather than eating out can save a great deal of money. Instead of ordering in or going to a restaurant during your lunch break, consider bringing a bag lunch to work. Not only can this help you save gas money and stretch your food dollar, but this change will also help you eat healthier. Instead of eating out regularly make it a special treat.

Although many of these tips may seem to lead to small savings, or be time consuming, in the long run, they will help you will save money and stretch your food dollar. As food prices continue to increase, these tips can help you make wise decisions on how you choose to spend your money.

Sources: "Stretching Your Supermarket Dollars." UF/IFAS Extension and "Food Supermarket Savings: 16 Tips that can Total Big Bucks". University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension

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