

Chow Line

News from the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences

Eat better without breaking the bank

I want to help my family eat better, but it seems like whenever I try to buy healthy foods, it costs a lot more. How can we eat better without totally breaking our food budget?

It might seem like eating healthfully could mean a higher grocery store bill. But it doesn't have to.

Several recent studies by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service examined this question and were highlighted in a feature article in the September 2015 issue of the service's online magazine, *Amber Waves*. The article's title, "Following Dietary Guidance Need Not Cost More—But Many Americans Would Need to Re-Allocate Their Food Budgets" pretty much sums up the findings.

Researchers used the Dietary Guidelines for Americans as a baseline for what a healthy diet should look like. In part, that means, for example, anyone consuming a 2,000-calorie-a-day diet — the estimated number of calories needed for moderately active women between 26 and 50 and sedentary men over age 60 — should be eating 2 cups of fruit, 2.5 cups of vegetables and at least 3 ounces of whole grains a day. Unfortunately, most of us don't meet those standards. On an average day, American adults tend to eat about 1 cup of fruit, 1.5 cups of vegetables, and less than 1 ounce of whole grains.

If cost was the major barrier to eating better, you'd think that families with higher incomes would have more nutritious diets. However, researchers found that households below 130 percent of the poverty line scored 48 percent on a Healthy Eating Index, a measure of how well a diet matches up with the Dietary Guidelines. Households with incomes of five times the poverty level scored only slightly higher, 54.5 percent.



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Studies found that all households, no matter the income level, tend to spend food dollars similarly, allocating 17-19 percent on fruits and vegetables, for example, and 21-28 percent on meat, poultry, seafood and eggs. The largest category, "miscellaneous foods," accounts for about 35 percent of the budget, and includes soft drinks, frozen meals, snacks, soups, salad dressings, candy, condiments, gourmet and specialty items, baby food, and seasonings. And all this doesn't even count the often-significant amount of money spent on eating out.

The researchers made several recommendations to improve a family's diet without emptying the wallet, including:

- Choose medium- to low-cost fruits and vegetables, and buy more of them.
- At the same time, reduce spending on miscellaneous food items, especially those higher in calories, added sugar and fat.
- Reduce spending on protein foods. You can do this in part by choosing more plant-based proteins, which are generally less expensive.
- Reduce how often you go out to a restaurant (fast food or sit-down), or order pizza or other food in. Researchers said substituting these meals with food prepared at home resulted in the greatest cost savings as well as the biggest boost in dietary quality.

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Editor: This column was reviewed by Irene Hatsu, Ohio State University Extension specialist in Food Security.

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