

Chow Line

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

Plan ahead to save at grocery store

My grocery bill seems to be getting more and more expensive. I noticed it especially when we stocked up the weekend before school started. What are some ways we can cut expenses but still have enough to eat?

The cost of food does inch up over time, but not as much as you might think. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's official figures, average costs for food for a family of four in June 2010 ranged from \$134.50 to \$265.90 a week, depending on whether you were being "thrifty" or "liberal" in your spending, compared with \$149.50 to \$296.80 in June 2015. Note that these estimates count food costs only, not cleaning products or other items that you probably also pick up at the grocery store. They also assume that you're buying foods for a nutritious diet and that you're eating all meals and snacks at home.

That said, here are some ideas from the USDA and the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics to save dollars at the grocery store:

- It's often said, but it works: Don't shop on an empty stomach. Going to the grocery store when you're hungry can lead to impulse purchases that add up at the cash register.
- Plan ahead. Look at your grocery store's weekly circular for sale items that you can build meals around. The circular is often available online if you don't see one in a local newspaper or with other advertisements delivered to your door.
- Better yet, look through the dark corners of your freezer and pantry for items you may have forgotten about and determine how you can use them for meals in the coming week. Making use of the food you already have is a no-brainer, especially during weeks when you anticipate



photo: Valueline

having extra expenses on non-food items — like toiletries or school notebooks.

- Use your week's menu to build your grocery list — and stick to your list. If you're tempted to buy something that's not on the list, think long and hard about it. Do so only if you know you need the item that week or if it's an especially good bargain.
- Check prices of sale items to see if you can get the same discount whether or not you purchase the suggested number of items. For example, if a sale item is marked "3 for \$6," you may be able to buy just one of the items for the sale price of \$2. This policy varies between stores and among items, but it's often listed on small print on the price tag on the grocery store shelf.
- Speaking of price tags, be sure to look at the unit price (price per ounce or other unit of measure) to compare how much you could save over time by buying a larger quantity. Sometimes the unit-price savings are significant, but not always.
- Take a close look at snack foods or other extras that you "always" put in your cart, examining not only their cost but the nutrition they provide, and determine if there's a better option. If you typically buy snack crackers, look for those that primarily provide whole grains — or consider whether a bag of apples could take their place.

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

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