

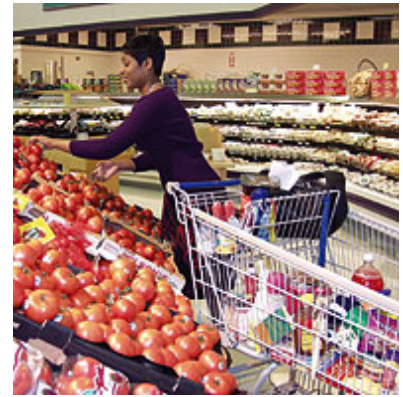
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## Can Less Money Equal Better Eating?

by Keith Thomas Ayob

(ABCNews) The less money you have, the better you can eat.



That sounds odd, but it can be true. So often people think that only when you're in the chips (cash, not the potato kind) can you have a good diet. Raspberries in February, organic baby veggies from Spain, 89-grain organic bread that was made at the hand of Bolivian monks who never watch television, meat from cows that spent time in a spa -- you name it.

It's easy to think there's no way a family with a modest budget -- even more modest, nowadays -- can have a healthy and decent diet without hawking the house.

It's a huge mistake to think that good healthy food has to cost a bundle. Sure, some of it does, but junk food is even more expensive in the long run. It's not so healthy, and it's loaded with calories, fat, salt and sugar. Even if it's free, it's not a bargain.

A lot of "luxury food" isn't all that healthy, either -- for instance, pricey Kobe beef that's been massaged by hand for extra marbling, to the tune of up to \$125 per pound. Great, but it's still loaded with fat, and your arteries don't care how the meat spent its days. Not-so-lean hamburger will have just as much fat and set you back considerably less, but don't eat too much of that, either.

The point is that big budget or small, your diet can be great or terrible. Since most people feel the financial pinch these days, let's examine how to eat well for less.

### Protein on the Cheap

First, let's take on protein. It's one of the most expensive parts of the diet because we tend to favor animal protein, and animals take a long time and effort to grow, increasing their cost.

Ironically, the most economical sources of animal protein also have the highest protein quality: eggs and milk. No kidding. The protein in these foods most closely matches the protein of human tissue, so the body uses it very efficiently.

Even with recent price increases, eggs and milk beat beef, hands down. Two eggs are only about 40 cents --

that's \$1.60 for a family of four. A glass of milk is about 25 cents -- cheaper than even a bargain can of soda. Milk and eggs also provide at least a dozen important nutrients each, so they're rock-solid nutrition sources.

No need to become a vegetarian, but if you trade one meat meal a week for an egg-based meal, you can eat well and pocket the spare change.

## Producing Produce on a Budget

The 2005 U.S. Dietary Guidelines recommend that people eat about four and a half cups of fruits and vegetables daily, for good health. But you don't need to buy raspberries in winter to get the job done. Eat seasonally and you'll do better.

During the summer, melons go a long way, and they're some of the healthiest fruits around. Watermelon and cantaloupe are loaded to the hilt with antioxidants, and they're terrific sources of potassium. Apples and oranges are around all winter, and they're at their peak then. Buy them by the bag and you'll save a bundle. A three-pound bag of apples is only about \$2.50, and they last forever in the crisper. A box of those supersweet clementines may be \$7, but it'll contain up to 30 fruits -- a huge bargain.

## Take a Pinto for a Spin

Beans are probably the top nutrition source here. Any type you like -- pinto, black, red, kidney -- they're all tops.

Beans are schizophrenic, too; they count as both a vegetable *and* a protein food. They're also a vegetable that kids and adults all like. They go in everything -- soups, salads, stir-fries, rice and pasta dishes. Plus, the canned ones are just fine and still among the best buys anywhere.

The dietary guidelines recommend half a cup daily, anyway, so beans are a great place to start eating better and for less. Incidentally, just one-half cup of pinto beans every day has been shown to reduce cholesterol by about 8 to 10 percent. With nutrition like that, beans should be on our plates no matter what our budgets are.

## Carrots, Cabbage and Collards -- Oh, My!

Carrots are the deep orange of the antioxidant carotene, cabbage is a high-octane cruciferous veggie, and deep-green collards have more anti-cancer compounds than almost any vegetable. And they're all economical. They never need go to waste, either, because the aging ones can always go into soups and stir-fries. The vitamin content may wane a little, but the minerals stay put, and so do most of the disease-fighting compounds.

See what I mean? Now, the other part of eating better on a budget involves ditching some of the wasted stuff. Sugar-water beverages -- of all colors -- are a total waste of money. If you really need a sweet beverage and you insist on it having sugar, then some homemade iced tea does the trick for next to nothing, plus tea is healthy. At least this way, you can control the amount of sugar and calories.

On the savory side, ditch the chips and even the pretzels. Invest in a hot-air popper and make popcorn -- the cheapest snack of all -- and it's even a whole grain treat. As an added bonus, clean up is easy because you don't use oil. Spray air-popped popcorn lightly with butter-flavored popcorn spray (it has no calories), and flavor it with all kinds of herbs, or just a little salt.

Eat smart with some of these tips and you and the family will make it out of this recession with extra money and healthier bodies.

