

Large grocery bills can take a toll on the bank account, but there are numerous ways to adhere to a budget at the store. Households don't have to sacrifice nutrition to save money.

TOPS Club, Inc. (Take Off Pounds Sensibly), the nonprofit weight-loss support organization, provides tips from Dena McDowell, M.S., R.D., C.D., nutritional expert for TOPS, that help make some of the most common New Year's resolutions attainable. Shrink grocery bills, eat healthier, and shrink the waistline, too.

Plan Ahead

Create a weekly or bi-weekly menu. Before purchasing food, make a list of groceries your family will need for the pre-planned meals and stick to the list as you make your way through the store. Check for coupons or specials that apply to items on the menu.

Also, avoid shopping on an empty stomach, so you aren't tempted to purchase extra foods. It's helpful to check the kitchen cupboards to see if an item on your grocery list is already on the shelf.

Buy Big, Save Big

Buy larger amounts of staple items, divide the food into smaller portions, and freeze the ingredients that aren't being used right away. Here are items that can be bought in bulk: Whole grain pasta, brown rice, potatoes, sweet potatoes, canned or dried beans, legumes, lentils, eggs, ground beef, chicken breast, canned fruits and vegetables.

Repurpose Leftovers

Don't toss leftovers or let them mold in the back of the fridge. There are numerous ways to reuse meat, cheese, and vegetables in a new dish. Use extra chicken and vegetables in a stir fry or turn leftovers from taco night into taco salad another evening. It may be helpful to include a "leftovers" night on the weekly menu.

Do It Yourself

Buying prepackaged or "convenience items" can be more expensive than preparing foods at home. To save money, buy a block of cheese and shred it by hand or cut fruits and vegetables rather than purchasing them already chopped. Individually-wrapped snacks can be costly. Consider getting a larger box or bag and dividing its contents into baggies or plastic containers.

Pick a New Protein

Go meatless for a few nights each week. There are numerous foods that offer protein for a smaller cost. Legumes, lentils, nuts, eggs, and cheese are examples of alternatives to meat. Use these items to concoct bean-based soups, vegetarian lasagna, or a peanut-vegetable stir fry. Or have breakfast for dinner, with eggs, whole grain toast, and fruit.

Shoppers can also buy meats at a slightly lower quality to save money. For instance, use ground beef instead of ground sirloin to save money. You can reduce the extra fat by browning the meat, pouring it into a colander, and rinsing it with water. Using stew meats can also save money, and they become tender when cooked in a crock pot.

Be Seasonal

Produce can be expensive, so buy items that are in season or on sale to help save money. Also, consider joining a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) network, where individuals buy into the farmers' yield. You are limited to what's in season, but the produce is fresher and costs less. Here are examples of the upcoming seasons' affordable produce:

Winter: Oranges, tangerines, broccoli, cauliflower, brussels sprouts, grapefruit, cabbage.

Spring: Asparagus, cherries, pineapples, artichokes, mushrooms, peas.

