Eating on a budget

You've just come home from a long day at work. Everyone is hungry but you don't have the skill or desire to spend time in the kitchen cooking a healthy and satisfying meal. And it doesn't help that you've forgotten to pick up groceries on the way home. You'd love to go out for dinner, but on your tight budget, it's not an option. Strapped for ideas on what to feed the family, you pick up a cheap array of deep fried food or crack open a box of prefabricated fare.

Sound familiar? Often when funds are limited, eating healthy can seem like a hassle and pretty tough to do. Factor in a busy schedule and/or a lack of cooking expertise and it's easy to give up on healthy eating all together. Fortunately, there are several ways to cut food costs *and* eat well without spending hours in the kitchen.

Plan nutritious meals. Planning meals and snacks for the next few days or weeks saves time and money. Use Canada's Food Guide to make smart food choices and read labels to ensure that you're not only keeping fat, salt and sugar at bay, but also are getting enough goodies like fibre and protein. Make meal planning easy by:

- Creating a list of the foods you need to use and refer to it when planning meals.
- Using recipes that are quick to prepare with few steps and simple ingredients. Make a recipe folder for quick access any time.
- Doing some of the food preparation ahead of time.
- Cooking enough for two meals so you can freeze the extras. Soups and stews are great for this.

Make a list. Once your meals are planned out, make a grocery list based on the meals and snacks you plan to make. Itemize your list according to the supermarket layout and/or food group (frozen food, produce etc.). If a recipe calls for a certain size package or can, write it down on your list.

Become a bargain hunter. Use coupons, flyers, and customer savings cards to save money. To plan your meals, make a list of items on sale in the flyer and try to look for recipes that use these foods in your planning process. Stretch your dollar even further and:

- Use sites like www.save.ca to find coupons for grocery store items and www.flyerland.ca to view online flyers for sale items.
- Shop online. Though prices may sometimes seem higher, you're less likely to buy items on impulse which will save you money and time in the long run. The best part? Food is delivered right to your door.
- Get to know the usual price of many of the items you buy. Just because an item is on sale doesn't mean you're saving money. You still need to compare prices.

Buy in season. Buy local and in season fruits and vegetables. They not only cost less but taste better and can be frozen for later. Or buy frozen fruits and vegetables which are packaged right after harvest so they retain their nutrients. Canned items are also a good option but, where vegetables are concerned, usually have a higher salt content then their frozen counterparts. Avoid frozen vegetables with special sauces and seasonings which tend to be salt-laden and cost considerably more.

Go meatless. High-protein food options like legumes, eggs, tofu, and nuts are tasty, healthy and inexpensive alternatives to meat, poultry or fish. If you can't live without meat, stretch your pennies further by mixing it into pasta, rice or veggie dishes for a filling, inexpensive main course. Remember a serving of meat is only 3oz (90g) or about the size of a deck of cards.

Buy in bulk. Pasta, legumes, spices, hot cereals and many other items found in the bulk food section of supermarkets are less expensive alternatives to pre-packaged foods, and you can choose the amount you want Buy jumbo packs or cases of non-perishable food items you tend to go through quickly. You'll not only save money, but a stocked pantry will help you resist take-out temptation.

Devise a supermarket strategy. Remain savvy in the supermarket by:

- Checking unit prices (located on the price label on the shelf) which will tell you how much the food costs per gram.
- Stocking up on store brands which are usually cheaper. Compare price, taste, and nutrition labels of various brands to find out your best choice.
- Eating before shopping so you won't be tempted to buy items not on your list.
- Avoiding shopping when you're tired or in a hurry.

Checking your receipt. Make sure your bill adds up correctly, especially with sale items. Some stores may give you the product for free for items under $10 if they overcharge you. This is part of a voluntary Scanning Code of Practice many major retailers participate in.

Try homemade. Aside from being cheaper than pre-packaged or convenience foods, preparing your own meals is more nutritious (often fewer preservatives, less salt, sugar and/or artificial ingredients). Save dining out for special occasions.

Storing food properly. You'll reduce spoilage and by doing so, save money. Label leftovers and opened containers with the date they should be used by. Re-wrap cheese in plastic wrap after opening, keep eggs in their original carton, and store spices and nuts in the freezer to extend their life.

Eating healthy doesn't have to be expensive. With a little planning and creativity, you can eat well, save money and never again shudder at the question, "What's for dinner?"