

Budget-Wise, Plant-powered Eating



Many people who are on a budget believe that eating healthy is next to impossible. With the escalating cost of fruits and vegetables, they opt for processed foods such as boxed macaroni and cheese, ramen noodles or white rice and canned meat. Eating out usually means fast food such as burgers, fries, tacos, or fried chicken. These are the types of foods most strongly linked with overweight, obesity and chronic diseases such as heart disease, hypertension, diabetes and even some cancers. Processed foods and fast foods concentrate potentially harmful dietary components such as damaging fats, refined carbohydrates (both starches and sugars), salt, artificial colors, flavors and preservatives. Such foods are often produced unsustainably, and tend to be over-packaged.

So how do we assist food insecure consumers in making the shift to a plant-strong diet? How can help individuals and families design diets that maximize health protective components such as fiber, vitamins, minerals, protein, essential fats, phytochemicals and antioxidants? First, we need to help consumers see the bigger picture. Healthful eating leads to increased well being, fewer sick days, better stamina, improved immune function, and vastly reduced risk of disease. Furthermore it means reduced health care costs, and more joy-filled lives.

Plant-centered diets can be simple or extravagant – just remember that the poorest people on the planet rely largely on beans, grains, and vegetables for their sustenance. These foods are not only economical but are earth-friendly as well.

Here are 10 tips to help consumers make penny-wise, nutrient-rich choices, and a delicious, nutritious menu that will fit any budget!

1. **Grow your own food.** Grow vegetables, herbs, berries and sprouts. If you are able, plant a fruit tree. If you do not have room for a garden, grow vegetables and herbs in containers on your balcony or doorstep, or rent space from a community garden. Always have sprouts on the go. Growing sprouts is easy, inexpensive and takes very little space. All you need are jars with sprouting lids (mesh bags and elastics also work on the jars), or sprouting bags, and seeds. Kamut or spelt berries, mung beans and lentils are all great choices. Sprouts contain a vast array of nutrients and are many times higher in protective phytochemicals than their unsprouted counterpart.
2. **Prepare your own food.** Learn basic food preparation skills such as cooking grains and beans. Make as much as you can from scratch – soups, stews, patties, loaves, healthy baked goods, breakfast cereals, smoothies, salad dressings and sauces. Cook in big batches and freeze portions for instant meals at a later date.
3. **Buy whole foods in bulk.** Unprocessed foods are less expensive and far more nutritious than their processed counterparts. A couple of potatoes might cost 50 cents but turn them into potato chips and the cost will be closer to three dollars. Buying in bulk is best for non-perishables such as grains, beans and canned or jarred goods as the cost per unit is usually significantly lower. If you have access to bulk fresh produce, dehydrating, canning or freezing can be very economical.
4. **Eat legumes for protein.** Legumes – beans, lentils, peas, and chickpeas are the least expensive, most nutrient dense protein choices on the planet. They provide high protein, iron, and zinc, but are low in fat and are cholesterol-free. In addition, beans are brimming with

fiber and phytochemicals. They are the best nutrition bargain on the block. The easiest way to begin using beans is to throw a few cooked beans into a soup or on a salad. Progress to bean-based main dishes such as spicy black beans over baked yams or lentil curry. Cook a big batch of beans and freeze in 1- or 2-cup bags. Lentils do not need soaking and are very quick cooking compared to other legumes. Dried beans are more economical than canned.

5. **Minimize processed, packaged, convenience and fast food.** Think nutrients per dollar and you will quickly see why highly processed and fast foods are no bargain at all.
6. **Buy local and in season.** Find out where local, seasonal foods are available in your community. When you buy local you avoid the added cost (both financial and ecological) of shipping foods long distances. Also, you can find incredible deals on very fresh foods. Produce tends to be one of the more expensive parts of the food bill for those on a budget, so be sure to take advantage of less expensive options such as cabbage, carrots, onions, potatoes, sweet potatoes. Also, consider frozen options when fresh are just too costly.
7. **Plan your meals.** Make a week long menu and a list of everything you will need to buy to prepare your meals. Factor in snacks as well. Be sure to look at what is on sale at the stores you shop to help you plan your menu. Build it around items that are on sale that week.
8. **Shop smart.** Check unit prices on foods. Shop at stores that are close to one another to save gas and time, but do consider shopping at several stores. Don't shop on an empty stomach, as you will be more prone to impulse purchases. If possible, go to farmer's markets (you can often get great deals at the end of the day) or directly to farms. Check out local ethnic stores as some have much lower prices on basic staples.
9. **Drink water.** Do not waste money on soda or other beverages with no nutritional value. Stick to water (not

bottled – tap water is fine; filter if you are able). Teas are can be reasonably inexpensive.

10. **Waste not, want not.** Do not throw food out unless it has gone bad. Eat leftovers for lunch or re-purpose them for dinner. Make a soup, casserole or salad with leftovers or freeze them for later use. Keep tabs on what is in your fridge so nothing goes to waste.

Super Simple Plant-based Menu

This menu, from *Cooking Vegan* (by dietitian Vesanto Melina and chef Joseph Forest, Book Publishing Co) is nutritious, economical and simple. There is just one meal to prepare—Stir Fry 101, with rice; stir fries allow for infinite variation. For lunch, either rely on canned soup, or save even more by cooking in quantity and freezing portions. Lentil soup or split pea soup are other high protein options; you'll find outstanding recipes in *Cooking Vegan*. Vary this basic menu according to your preferences, as much as possible relying on whole plant foods. When eating completely plant-based, include a vitamin B₁₂: supplement (such as 1000 mcg twice a week).

Breakfast

2 slices of whole grain toast, each with 2 tsp of almond butter or peanut butter, plus 1 cup calcium-fortified juice

or

1 bowl oatmeal with 1 cup calcium-fortified soymilk, your favorite fruit and 2-3 tablespoons of walnuts and/or seeds (pumpkin, hemp, chia, etc.)

Lunch

Black bean soup, 11 oz can

Whole grain crackers, 4

Apple, 1 (or other fruit)

Supper

Stir Fry 101, 2 1/4 cups vegetables and chickpeas

Brown rice, 1 1/2 cups

Snacks

Trail mix: 1/3 c walnuts, peanuts and other nuts and seeds,
1/2 c figs or other dried fruit

Nutritional analysis of menu: calories: 1992, protein: 61 g, fat: 68 g, carbohydrate: 305 g, dietary fiber: 55 g, calcium: 992 mg, iron: 18 mg, magnesium: 617 mg, phosphorus: 1269 mg, potassium: 3946 mg, sodium 994 mg, zinc: 11 mg, thiamin: 1.5 mg, riboflavin: 1.2 mg, niacin: 26 mg, vitamin B₆: 1.9 mg, folate: 548 mcg, vitamin A: 744 mcg, vitamin C: 391 mg, vitamin E: 21 mg, omega-3 fatty acids: 3 g

Percentage of calories from: protein 12%, fat 29%, carbohydrate 59%

The process is fun, you can create your masterpiece alone or in company, and the combinations are unlimited. A traditional stir-fry is made over high heat in a round-

bottomed cooking vessel known as a wok. This recipe can be made in a frying pan or wok and uses very little oil. Serve with cooked rice.

1 tablespoon canola oil, olive oil or other vegetable oil

1/2 onion, large diced

1 cup sliced carrots, cut diagonally

1 cup broccoli florets

1 cup cooked chickpeas

1 cup sliced red peppers

1 cup trimmed snow peas

1 cup sliced bok choy

1/4 cup stir fry sauce (made with 2 tbsp fresh minced ginger, 2 tbsp tamari or soy sauce, and 1/4 cup orange juice concentrate

or

use commercial stir-fry sauce to taste

Heat the oil in a wok or large skillet over medium-high heat; heat to 400 degrees F if using an electric frying pan. Add the onion and cook until it begins to turn brown. Add the carrots, broccoli, and chickpeas and cook until the carrots and broccoli are almost tender crisp. Add the peppers, snow peas, bok choy, and sauce and cook for 1 minute or until the vegetables are warm and wilted.

Per serving (2 1/4 cups): calories: 378, protein: 16 g, fat: 9 g, carbohydrate: 61 g, dietary fiber: 11 g, calcium: 180 mg, iron: 7 mg, magnesium: 115 mg, phosphorus: 311 mg, potassium: 1329 mg, sodium: 605 mg, zinc: 2.3 mg, thiamin: 0.5 mg, riboflavin: 0.5 mg, niacin: 7 mg, vitamin B₆: 0.9 mg, folate: 322 mcg, pantothenic acid: 2.25 mg, vitamin B₁₂: 0 mcg, vitamin A: 749 mcg, vitamin C: 308 mg, vitamin E: 5 mg, omega-3 fatty acids: 0.2 g

Percentage of calories from: protein 15%, fat 23%, carbohydrate 62%

Stir Fry Variations:

1. Replace any of the vegetables with seasonal, economical options – sliced celery, green or yellow beans, green onions, green or yellow peppers, zucchini, eggplant, mushrooms, Napa cabbage, green or red cabbage, okra, mung bean sprouts, sugar snap peas or frozen peas all work well. Be creative!
2. Add 2 cloves garlic, minced and/or 1 tablespoon minced ginger.
3. Replace the chickpeas with cubed firm tofu, marinated tofu, tempeh, veggie “chicken” (such as Gardein), or sliced seitan.

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