

# Eating Healthy on a Budget

With inflation and supply chain shortages complicating household budgets, how can you prepare healthy meals without breaking the bank on that \$4 organic cucumber?

It's simpler than you think.

Sabine Gempel, DPT, PT, has a pantry full of ideas to make meals appetizing and affordable. Gempel is a physical therapist specializing in cardiovascular and pulmonary health at the University of Miami Health System.

## Pick the right produce



Buying organic foods reduces the number of pesticides and other chemicals you consume. For many shoppers, it's not always practical. It may be too expensive, or the veggie you need for your prize-winning chili isn't available in organic.

There are ways to get around this.

Gempel, who has followed a vegan diet for many years, says, "It's always better to include produce in your diet, whether it's organic or not than to not eat produce at

all. Frozen organic fruits and vegetables are more affordable than fresh. When shopping, prioritize buying organic varieties of the ‘Dirty Dozen’ – produce that requires more pesticide. It’s okay to purchase non-organic varieties of the ‘Clean Fifteen’; just wash thoroughly with water and vinegar before eating.”

She also recommends buying produce in season when it’s fresher and cheaper.

When dining out, Gempel reminds us that “Vegan or vegetarian options are typically more affordable.”

## **Fish for the frugal**

You may think seafood is off the menu when you’re struggling to stay on a budget. You don’t have to miss out on the health benefits of fish and other seafood when times are tight. Just shop wisely.

“The healthiest varieties, with the highest omega-3 and lowest amounts of contaminants, are wild salmon, sardines, mussels, rainbow trout, and Atlantic mackerel. Varieties with the lowest omega-3 that are higher in contaminants and that cause more inflammation are shrimp, clams, scallops, tilapia, and catfish,” Gempel says.

Seafood is a leaner, healthier form of protein than red meat. If you want to include it in your diet, Gempel suggests reviewing the Environmental Working Group’s Consumer Guide to Seafood. And like produce, buying frozen or in-season seafood, or watching for sales, benefits your budget.

## A simple switch to help you eat healthy

“The average American’s diet contains 60-70% processed and ultra-processed food. The number one thing you can do to improve your general health is stop eating processed and ultra-processed food. It’s a simple switch that saves money and your health,” Gempel says.

Instead of refined, highly processed white flour, grains, and pasta, switch to whole grain products. Save big by buying rice, beans, grains, and pasta in bulk. Yes, even pasta is healthy if you shop wisely.

“Pastas made from lentils and beans are relatively affordable. The problem with pasta is more the stuff that comes with it, such as cheese and meat,” Gempel says.

Simmer some frozen veggies in red sauce and ladle over whole grain or plant-based pasta for a fast, frugal, and nourishing meal. (*Tip: Read the labels: Some prepared red sauces are high in sodium.*)

What if your cultural traditions favor refined food products? “When patients are used to eating white rice and beans, I tell them to start with 75% white and 25% whole grain rice, and gradually add more whole grain rice as they adjust.”

## Pass on protein powders

Protein powders and shakes are marketed as health foods. They are an unnecessary expense, Gempel says, unless you’re elderly, have little appetite, and need the calories and convenience. Or maybe you’re sipping shakes because you want to build muscle mass.

If you’re trying to lose weight, protein shakes and smoothies can serve as a

helpful meal replacement option but should be planned carefully as they can easily be quite calorie-dense. However, most people benefit more from eating whole foods. It's also less expensive to toss any of the following into your blender:

- Frozen or fresh fruit
- Fresh or frozen spinach or kale
- Avocado
- A handful of nuts, chia, or hemp seeds
- Peanut or nut butter
- Raw oats
- Nut milk

## Keep an open mind

When guiding patients through dietary decisions, “The two most common misconceptions I hear about healthy eating is that it’s too expensive and it’s not delicious,” Gempel says. She’s happy to change those perceptions with some easy guidelines:

1. Buy frozen or in bulk.
2. Instead of excess salt, fattening sauces, or creams, use herbs and spices.
3. Buy in-season.
4. Keep healthy on hand. “I always have a lot of salsas, pesto, and hummus in my fridge and veggie burgers in my freezer.”
5. Batch cook. “It’s a real time-saver to cook oats, grains, and beans in large batches.” Grains and beans serve as the basis for bowls, scrambles, burritos, and other quick healthy meals.
6. Learn to cook new recipes and cook with your family and friends.

“Eating healthy on a budget becomes second nature after a while and can be just as flavorful as eating expensively,” Gempel says.

There’s no shame in eating a humble meal of beans and whole grain rice, especially if it results in the most incredible wealth of all: the gift of good health.

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*Nancy Moreland is a regular contributor to UMiami Health News. She has written for several major health care systems and the CDC. Her writing also appears in the Chicago Tribune and U.S. News & World Report.*

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