Stretching Your Food Dollar—Participant Handout

Tips for Making a Food Plan and Budget

- **Shop with a plan in mind.** Plan menus with what you already have on hand in your pantry, cupboard and freezer. The internet offers many websites devoted to low-cost cooking and menu planning.
- **Go with list** of what you need and stick to it!
- **Before you shop, take stock of your food on-hand.** Don’t buy more until you have used up what you already have.
- **Eat before you shop.** When you are hungry, everything looks good!
- **Shop alone if possible.** Children can, and will, add things to your cart which you won’t find until you are in the check-out line, putting you over budget.
- **Time your shopping trips** to coincide with in-store specials and coupons. Specials usually run mid-week to mid-week.
- **Check websites** for rebates, refunds and freebies.
- **Get family members involved with clipping coupons,** planning menus and checking out store circulars. It can be fun! And save you time.
- **Pay with cash, debit card, or check.** When you use your credit cards for food, and you don’t pay off the balance each month, you pay interest on that shopping trip, which ends up costing you more in the long run.

Tips for Adopting Good Shopping Strategies

- **Buy in bulk.** Bulk buying can save you money – but only if you buy the family size and per-unit cost is lower. Make sure you have a place to store bulk purchases, and you will use bulk items before the use-by-date. Only buy what you will use. Throwing away food is the same as throwing away money.
- **Put on blinders**—Grocery stores are designed to make you go through a maze to get to the most basic items you need in the hope you will make a few impulse buys along the way. Shop the perimeter first for the basics, and then the middle of the store to find the remaining items on your list.
- **Whenever possible, buy local, and in season.** Canned or frozen foods, because they are harvested and processed at the peak of flavor near where they are picked, often contain more nutrients than food that has traveled long distances. Food out of season (i.e. peaches in December) is generally more expensive than food in season.
Tips for Maximizing Food Use with Cooking Techniques:

- **Avoid prepared foods**—almost any pre-packaged food you buy can be made at home cheaper and more nutritiously. For example, you can grate your own cheese and wash and cut your own vegetables cheaper than you can buy them.
• **Skip bottled water.** Tap water is fine. If you don’t care for the taste of your tap water, consider purchasing a filter, or add lemon or lime to your water pitcher.

• **Experiment with meals with five or fewer ingredients** in the main dish. Meat is probably the most expensive food expense. Check out vegetarian options, with beans or alternative protein sources, one day a week. Build meals around whole grains or whole grain pasta, using little meat. Make enough to freeze for later use.

• **Learn to substitute recipe ingredients.** Don’t have kale? Use spinach or beet greens instead. Use ground turkey (which costs less and contains less fat) instead of ground beef. If the recipe calls for an herb or spice you don’t have, try something else or leave it out.

• **Make your own convenience foods.** Keeping items like quick breads and frozen cookie dough in the freezer can cut down on the need for store bought treats. Make your own mixes too, such as taco seasoning, pancake and cornbread mixes. Learn to live without store-bought convenience foods, which are high in sodium and cost more.

• **Utilize appliances you may already own** such as bread machines, slow cookers, blenders and waffle irons.

• **Try recipes for ethnic food.** Many ethnic cuisines are built around grains, fruits and vegetables. Meat doesn’t need to be in a starring role. Experiment with spices.

• **Reduce the amount of meat in soups and stews,** and add more vegetables and/or dried beans.

• **Make use of leftovers.** At the end of the week pull out all your leftovers from the refrigerator and instruct your family that this is dinner. They can have anything they want for dinner, as long as it is leftovers—the cook is taking the night off! Be sure leftovers are heated to steaming hot.

• **Use leftover vegetables** you have at the end of the week: chop them up and add to chicken broth with onions, garlic and leftover chicken if you have it, and add some rice or noodles. The result? Delicious, inexpensive, homemade soup. Vegetables and grains also fill you up.

• **Pack your lunch for work,** and make your own snacks.

• **Prepare food ahead.** Spend some time on the weekend pre-making dishes, and freezing them, to serve during the week. Do prep such as chopping vegetables for stir-frys or casseroles, cooking meat, boiling rice or noodles, making biscuits, and making tomato sauce or applesauce. The time spent will help on Wednesday when everyone wants to know what is for dinner, and you’re too tired to think about what to make. Just pull out a casserole, add a salad and your homemade biscuits, and you have dinner.

*Prepared by Anna Bloom, OSU Extension Family and Community Health. Community Connection of Northeast Oregon contributed to this lesson.*