

As prices rise, find ways to trim grocery bills

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The rising cost of gas, diesel fuel and other forms of energy can affect the price of many other things that we purchase, from milk and bread to coffee and sugar. It can be a real challenge to keep family food costs manageable in today's economy, according to a foods expert in Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences.

"Saving money on your food bill will take some practice and planning," says Kathy DiGuseppe, supervisor of Penn State Cooperative Extension's Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program in Montgomery County. "But small changes can add up to large savings."

DiGuseppe recommends these strategies to help families get the most from their grocery dollars:

-- Create a food budget. "Take the time to figure out how much money your budget allows for food each month, then divide your monthly food budget by how many times you shop each month," she says. "Get cash for the budgeted amount and take only that amount to the grocery store. This will assure that you spend only what you budget."

-- Plan meals before you go to the grocery store. Write up a menu of the meals and snacks you plan to prepare for the week, while making sure they are affordable and fit your food budget. "Consider using the food you may already have at home on your menu, which will save you money and help clean out the pantry," DiGuseppe advises.

-- Make a list of the food you will need to prepare your meals. After

checking the cupboards, review your menus and make a list to take to the grocery store. "Choose the grocery store that will give you the most for your money," DiGuiseppe says. "You usually have to pay higher prices in convenience stores. Supermarkets will nearly always have lower prices than small stores, because they can buy their stock in larger quantities."

-- Shop the grocery store ads and look for coupons. Remember to use the coupons only on items you actually use, and avoid buying items just because you have a coupon. "Make sure the item with the coupon is really the best buy," says DiGuiseppe.

-- Buy less expensive store brands instead of highly advertised brands. "Store brands often are the same quality as the name brands and almost always save you money," she says.

-- Don't shop on an empty stomach. If you go to the store hungry, you are likely to buy more food -- including unnecessary and expensive items. "Instead, have a small snack before you go grocery shopping," DiGuiseppe says.

-- Beware the end caps. Food on aisle "end caps" is attractively displayed to entice shoppers to make additional purchases, but these displays do not always feature sale items or bargains.

-- Compare prices by using cost per unit of various foods. The "unit price" usually is listed on the grocery shelf. The unit price is the cost of the item per ounce, quart, gallon, pound or any other unit of measure. Also compare forms of food. Buy a lower-cost form of the food if it will do as well. Example: frozen green beans if fresh are too expensive.

DiGuiseppe says if you follow these tips regularly, you'll start to see a difference in your expenditures. "Food costs can really add up quickly

for most families," she notes. "We can't control the cost of fuel or even food, but if we manage our food dollars wisely, we will have more money in our wallets in the end."

Source: Penn State

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