

Cheap, Fast and Nutritious:

A Menu to Fit Your Grad Lifestyle

As a graduate student, you probably have many, competing food needs: you're busy, so meals must be fast and easy; you're on a tight budget, so food must be cheap; and you need a lot of energy to fuel your daily activities, so good nutrition is essential. It adds up to a pretty tall order, but, with advance planning, smart shopping, proper food storage and easy recipes, you can eat well despite your tight budget and tighter schedule.

Meal Planning Basics

Food is a critical component of your budget, so take the time to evaluate how much you spend on it. In addition to what you buy at the grocery store, don't forget to factor in trips to the coffee shop, convenience store and vending machines.

Planning your meals ahead of time will reduce your need to spend at those non-grocery-store outlets, where prices are always higher. It also means fewer trips to the grocery store, and most people spend more the more frequently they shop. In addition to saving money, fewer shopping trips also means you're saving time, and, by planning your meals for the week, you can make sure your diet includes all the nutrients your busy lifestyle demands.

First, develop a roster of recipes you like to make. Plan your meals for a week at a time. Determine what you already have in the kitchen, then make your grocery list based on the recipes for the meals you've planned. At the grocery store, look for sales or special items. Save money on fruits and vegetables by buying what is in season or look for frozen or canned. Back at home, cook extra so you'll have leftovers for lunch or another dinner. Don't overeat just because you have extra; if this might be a temptation for you, immediately freeze leftovers in single-serving containers.

Meal Planning Problems Spots

It's true what your mom told you: breakfast is the most important meal of the day. But this is also the most difficult meal for most of us to plan. With every breakfast, aim to include three food groups: grain, fruit and dairy. When you don't have time to sit down, assemble quick combos to eat

on the go: toast with peanut butter, a banana and yogurt; or a sandwich baggie of dry cereal, string cheese and a piece of fruit.

Pack snacks for school so you can avoid the vending machines: fruit, baby carrots, pretzels, saltines with peanut butter or yogurt, if you have access to a refrigerator. Carry a bottle of water to save on beverages; add lemon slices to keep the water tasting fresh all day.

Sometimes you have to eat out, and of course, sometimes you just want to. You can make choices, though, to cut the cost and calories involved. Seventy percent of fast food visits are based on impulse, so planning ahead will help you avoid the drive-through. When it's the only option, look for the healthier menu items most fast food venues now offer, and remember to watch your portion sizes. General rules of thumb for restaurant dining: choose smaller sizes, such as half-orders or children's menu items; split a meal with a friend; eat half the meal and take the rest home for the next day's lunch; choose vegetable sides over French fries; hold the mayonnaise; avoid fried food; order water rather than soda or tea; and, instead of dinner, eat out for lunch, when menu items are less expensive and may be available in smaller servings. If you eat out for lunch or dinner, plan a light menu for the day's other meal.

Smart Shopping Basics

When it comes to your food dollar, one of the first decisions you may need to make is how to balance your need for convenience with your need for savings. There are some basic shopping tips everyone should follow, though: Don't shop when you're hungry. Stick to your shopping list unless you find similar items on sale. Avoid the displays and units on the ends of aisles: these tend to encourage impulse buys. Buy in bulk only what you can eat before it spoils.

The price labels on the shelf (for meats, the label will be on the product) include, in small print, an item's price per unit. Use the unit price to compare the value of different-sized packages. If the larger package is cheaper per unit, buy it, unless it is more than you can eat. Consider buying generic brands of some items if the taste/quality difference is acceptable.

Clip coupons, but not for anything you don't usually buy unless it is a splurge or a treat. Beware of sales fliers: sometimes the highlighted items are not actually on sale; it's just the everyday price being advertised. Also, know a store's rules for things like two-for-one items: some stores will give you the special price even if you buy only one; others won't. Frequent-shopper discount cards can be useful, too, as long as they don't induce you to buy items you ordinarily wouldn't. Ask how the store will use the personal information it collects on the card application. Some will only use it to mail you coupons; others will sell it to other marketers.

Buy fresh fruits and vegetables at least once a week. Keep frozen produce on hand for when you run out of fresh. Buy canned fruits and vegetables when they are on sale, as they keep much longer and can help you stretch your pantry stock until the end of the month.

Protein foods tend to take up a large part of our budgets, because they are higher priced. Buy meat, poultry and fish in large packages, then separate them, wrap individual pieces in plastic and put them in freezer bags or plastic containers to freeze as single servings. Beans are an inexpensive source of protein. Canned beans are the most convenient, but they tend to be high in sodium, so drain them into a colander and rinse well before eating. Dried beans are inexpensive but require more prep time. Buy dairy and eggs in small quantities, as they spoil quickly. ■

Based on the Graduate School seminar "Nutrition: How to Eat Well on a Tight Budget" by Kelly Cordray Bryant of the Cooperative Extension Service and Allison McCamey Herring of the Department of Foods and Nutrition. To view this seminar in full, visit <http://www.grad.uga.edu>.

Stock Your Pantry for Meals-in-Minutes

Even the best meal planners have days where they just need to grab a few ingredients and throw together something easy. Be prepared for those days by stocking your freezer and pantry with foods that make good easy-meal components, including: whole wheat tortillas, all kinds of beans, pasta, spaghetti sauce, frozen vegetables, frozen vegetable pizzas, frozen chicken breasts, whole wheat bread, frozen bagged stir-fry meals, nuts or nut butter and unsweetened, whole grain cereal.

And, of course, it doesn't hurt to have a roster of quick-meal recipes. You can find many such recipes free on the Web. Check out the following sites:

- <http://www.eatwellga.com> (Food and nutrition tips from the University of Georgia Cooperative Extension service; or go directly to the recipes at <http://www.fcs.uga.edu/ext/pubs/efnep/recipes.php>.)
- <http://www.allfood.com/mmeal.cfm>
- <http://www.cnpp.usda.gov/Pubs/Cookbook/thriftym.pdf> (Thrifty meal plans and recipes from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.)