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QuickTakes



Diet Improvements

Diet improvements should not cost more than not-so-healthy eating. Healthy eating on a budget is totally possible. You don't have to resort to junk food or fast food to save money. You might have to spend a little more time in the kitchen. But you'll soon find that the delicious, healthy, affordable meals are worth the extra effort.

10 Healthy Staples for Under \$5

Check out the list below for examples of good value in common kitchen staples. Prices may vary based on the store, location, and time of year.

1. Brown Rice

Price per serving: About 12¢. A 16-ounce bag of store-brand brown rice costs about \$1.19 and makes 10 servings, based on a serving of 1/4 cup dry rice.

Nutrition highlights: Brown rice has five times the fiber of white rice and is richer in nutrients.

Tips for use: Bring water or broth to a boil, add rice with spices, herbs, dried fruits, nuts, aromatic vegetables, or whatever strikes your fancy.

2. Old-Fashioned Rolled Oats

Price per serving: About 24¢. A 16-ounce bag of old-fashioned rolled oats costs about \$2.89 and makes 12 servings, based on a serving of 1/2 cup dry oats.

Nutrition highlights: Oats have the highest proportion of soluble fiber of all the grains. Soluble fiber contributes to a healthy cholesterol level and helps prevent diabetes.

Tips for use: People who start the day with a hot bowl of satisfying oatmeal swear they don't get hungry until lunchtime. Oats are good in muffins, cookies, and breads, too.

3. Frozen Vegetables

Price per serving: From 25¢ to 60¢. Frozen veggies come in 12-ounce to 24-ounce bags that cost anywhere from \$1.89 to \$3.99 and contain 6 to 8 cups depending on the vegetable and size of the bag. A single serving is generally considered to be 1 cup.

Nutrition highlights: Fresh or frozen, vegetables can fill you up on fewer calories. They also deliver lots of vitamins and potassium, which helps regulate blood pressure.

Tips for use:

- Stir frozen peas or green beans into rice toward the end of cooking for a colorful accent.
- Add frozen corn kernels to soups or chilis.
- Frozen collards or mustard greens don't need the long simmering of their fresh counterparts.

4. Whole-Grain Pasta

Price per serving: From 29¢ to 49¢. The typical box of dried pasta weighs between 14 and 16 ounces and may cost between \$1.99 and \$3.49. Prices vary and it pays to pay attention to weekly specials. Two ounces of dried pasta is considered a healthy serving size.

Nutrition highlights: Whole-grain pasta delivers protein and fiber.

Tips for use:

- Whole-grain pasta pairs best with tomato-based sauces and sturdy vegetables like broccoli or cauliflower.
- Toss Japanese soba (buckwheat) noodles with a little soy sauce and Chinese chili paste for a lively accompaniment to grilled chicken or fish.

5. Baby Spinach

Price per serving: About 43¢. A 14-ounce bag of baby spinach leaves costs about \$2.99 and yields about seven 2-cup servings.

Nutrition highlights: Raw or cooked, spinach is a nutritional powerhouse. Two cups of raw leaves supply more than 50% of your vitamin A and folic acid plus 10% of your iron, vitamin C, and Vitamin E.

Tips for use:

- Baby spinach leaves are especially good in salads.
- Sauté with garlic and olive oil.
- Add to soups, stews, omelets, or pasta sauces.

6. Bananas

Price per serving: About 45¢. A typical banana weighs 7 to 8 ounces unpeeled. Bananas cost on average 89¢ per pound.

Nutrition highlights: When you're craving something sweet, reach for a banana, not a candy bar. You'll save money and calories and get a healthy dose of vitamins C and B6 and potassium. A medium banana has about 110 calories.

Tips for use: Add to fruit salads or your morning cereal. Or simply eat out of your hand.

7. Sweet Potatoes

Price per serving: About 62¢. Sweet potatoes can run as low as 99¢ per pound. A medium sweet potato weighs about 10 ounces

Nutrition highlights: This orange tuber outranks a regular baked potato in both vitamins A and C and fiber, and has a lower-glycemic index, which means it keeps blood sugar levels more steady. Sweet potatoes are a good source of vitamins E and B6, and potassium and iron, too.

Tips for use:

- Sweet potatoes make a delicious hearty snack. Pierce in several places and bake like a baking potato – 30 minutes in a 400°F oven or 12 minutes in a microwave.
- Cut scrubbed sweet potatoes into wedges, toss with olive oil and thyme. Place on a baking sheet lined with parchment and roast at 375°F for 25 to 30 minutes.
- Boil sweet potato chunks until tender. Mash and season with curry powder or maple syrup or cinnamon or other favorite seasonings.

8. Marinara Sauce

Price per serving: About 65¢. One 25-ounce jar of this traditional tomato sauce costs about \$3.89, and provides about six 1/2-cup servings. Store brands are often less expensive.

Nutrition highlights: Low in calories and high in vitamins A and C. Some fiber too. Do pay attention to the label on the jar and choose a brand without added sugar or excess sodium.

Tips for use: A must for pizza, pasta, eggplant Parm and other Italian favorites. To raise the bar nutritionally, add chopped broccoli to the sauce as you heat it.

9. Canned Beans

Price per serving: About 66¢. A 15-ounce can contains 3 generous 1/2-cup servings. You can buy a can of low-sodium, organic beans for about \$1.99. Stock up when beans are on sale. Better yet, start with dried beans to cut the per-serving cost in half!

Nutrition highlights: A.k.a. "poor man's meat," beans are an excellent lean protein source, plus they contain plenty of B vitamins, iron, and fiber.

Tips for use:

- Add your favorite beans to soups, stews, pilafs, even pasta dishes.
- Toss drained beans with fresh herbs and a little olive oil to serve as a side dish.

10. Frozen Berries

Price per serving: From 70¢ to 99¢. Frozen berries come in 10-ounce to 16-ounce bags that cost anywhere from \$2.99 to \$4.99 and contain 3 to 6 cups depending on the fruit and the size of the bag. A single serving is generally considered to be 1 cup.

Nutrition highlights: For snacking, smoothies, baking, and salads, frozen berries deliver all the nutrition of fresh for half the price. If you are trying to get more fiber, raspberries and blackberries are the highest, with 8 grams per cup.

Tips for use:

- Throw some berries in a blender with low-fat yogurt and a splash of OJ for a tasty smoothie.
- Top breakfast cereal with a handful of berries.
- Mix still-frozen berries into muffin and pancake batter.

"Tastes Like Homemade" Spaghetti Sauce

Makes about 4 cups, for 8 servings. Cost per serving: About 80¢. With minimal effort, you can transform a jar of commercial spaghetti sauce into something that tastes like it simmered on your stovetop for hours.

INGREDIENTS

2 teaspoons olive oil	2 cloves garlic, minced
1 large sweet onion, chopped	2 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley, oregano or basil
1 26-ounce jar low-sodium marinara sauce	Freshly ground black pepper to taste
1 large vine-ripened tomato, chopped	

NUTRITION INFO PER ½ CUP SERVING

125 Calories	23 g Carbohydrate
2 g Fat	5 g Fiber
0.3 g Saturated fat	205 mg Sodium
5 g Protein	

DIRECTIONS

1. Heat olive oil in a large saucepan over medium heat. Add onions and cook, stirring often, until very soft, about 6 minutes. Stir in marinara sauce, tomatoes, garlic, herbs, and pepper. Simmer for 10 minutes to blend flavors.
2. Serve with whole-wheat spaghetti or other whole-grain dried pasta.

