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Skip the dollar menu! Eating well on a budget  
You don't have to ruin your diet to survive the economic downturn

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The economy's tanking; hand me that bag of chips. Some nutrition experts are worried that tough times will make Americans heavier than ever as we turn to low-cost, high-calorie, high-comfort, high-fat foods.

In fact, when it comes to food, price is becoming the No. 1 concern for cash-strapped consumers, according to a recent study from the International Food Information Council. How do we eat well and not bust our diet or grocery budgets?

**Msnbc.com contributors [Bonnie Taub-Dix](#), a registered dietitian in New York City and a spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association and [Lisa Young](#), a registered dietitian, adjunct professor at New York University and author of "The Portion Teller Plan," weigh in.**

**Q.** How does someone eat a healthy diet on a tight budget and still focus on convenience?

**A.** Bonnie Taub-Dix: You have to shop smart and be creative in your cooking. For example, a lot of people still think protein is such an important thing to have in large quantities and that's not the case. If you want to save money, protein is an expensive part of the meal. But you can make dishes with a little less protein. Buy frozen, canned or fresh vegetables and add some protein to the vegetable dish, such as a cooked whole grain pasta. Or chunks of chicken. You'll have a combination dish that's not only low in fat, full of vitamins and minerals, but it's really quite inexpensive and convenient to make.

Another inexpensive item people tend to under use is eggs. You could make a frittata for your family with lots of veggies and some low-fat cheese and two whole eggs. It's low in calories, high in protein and really low in carbohydrates.

Also, people don't always have time to cook and prepare breakfast. In that case, have a turkey sandwich. Even a quick sandwich of something like that is a great healthy and inexpensive way to start your day. It's certainly better than skipping breakfast and less expensive than buying a muffin, pastry or croissant outside. All you get from those items is carbohydrates and fat. They're not going to nourish you through the day.

**Q. Some public health experts worry that the economic crunch will worsen America's obesity problem because people will eat more low-cost junk foods. Fast**

**food chains are pushing their dollar menus again. When people eat out, what should they watch for?**

**A. Lisa Young: When everything is so expensive, people aren't going to think that clearly about eating healthfully. It's easier and cheaper to get junk food and you have to think about trying to get the healthy stuff.**

**If you're going out to a restaurant, don't be lured by the dollar menus. The problem with them, they tend to be junk like soda or fries. When you go to fast food, the best thing to get would be to get a salad or grilled chicken.**

**There's a combination things of going on. The dollar menus are being pushed, but there's also the possibility of smaller portions being offered in restaurants instead of raising the prices, which is a good thing [for waistlines]. For example, Dunkin' Donuts is pushing a 99-cent latte promotion. It's a smaller size with fewer calories. That's an example of a smaller portion that's also good for the budget.**

**Q. Are you concerned about what effect the economy is going to have on our diets?**

**A. Taub-Dix: After 9/11 [and the subsequent economic slowdown], people got very apathetic about what they ate. They stopped being careful about their diets and said they were going to their favorite bakery and buy all the cake they wanted. I think people are looking for comfort now, too, as well as trying to save money. But too many comfort foods that are high in calories and high in fat lead to discomfort in the long run.**

**There's nothing wrong with occasionally purchasing fast food. But it shouldn't become the sole source of nutrition for your diet. It's not just about the money you're spending now, it's the value of your health [later]. Don't empty your wallet with empty calories.**

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