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Taste on a tight budget

Get smart with expert advice on how to eat right and stay healthy despite the soaring prices

By Bernadette Abraham, Special to Unwind

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UNWIND



Head to the fruit and veg market in Dubai for cost conscious food shopping

Image Credit: Arshad Ali, Gulf News

Given the economic difficulties and the rise in food prices in the UAE, it isn't uncommon to be living on a tighter grocery and outdoor-dining budget. However, cutting back on food expenses does not mean you have to compromise on quality.

One way to save money is to choose healthier alternatives. A study published in the Journal of the American Dietetic Association showed that consumers reduced their weekly food bill when they cut down on junk food and other high-calorie items. Eliminating junk food is not the only cost-cutting strategy. Here are some more:

Follow the pyramid: According to the food guide pyramid, our diet should mostly consist of whole grains, vegetables and fruits. But many people focus on meat as the main dish and pay little attention to the other food groups.

This practice is more expensive and less heart-healthy. Reduce the intake of meat to a maximum of twice weekly or add it to other dishes that are loaded with grains and

vegetables such as stir-fries, soups, stews and casseroles. Try a meatball-and-vegetable soup, which is loaded with fibre, protein and complex carbohydrates.

Get creative with protein: Meat, poultry and seafood are usually the most expensive food items. Instead, give the vegetarian protein sources — such as tofu, lentils and beans — a fair chance. Beans are a great source of protein and have low levels of saturated fat. Try this spinach-and-lentil soup for a wholesome meal.

1 cup green lentils
1 onion, chopped
7 cups water
1/2 cup macaroni, wholewheat
200g spinach, minced
1 lemon, juiced
1 tsp salt
Pepper to taste

In a large pot, sauté onions until tender. Add lentils and water. Boil for 45 minutes or until lentils are cooked. Add spinach and macaroni. Cook until macaroni is tender. Season with salt, pepper and lemon juice. Serve hot.

Buy produce at a discount: Fruits and vegetables are a must on everyone's shopping list. But don't forget to check out the discounted rack at Choithram supermarkets. That's where you will often find food products that are nearing the expiry date — for a fraction of the regular cost. Shopping late can also save you money. Leftover ripe produce is usually thrown away, so ask the manager on duty for a discount and you might get them for half the price.

Here's what you can do with ripe produce:

Steam and purée vegetables and add them to soup or stew. Make vegetable stock and store in the refrigerator.

Overripe bananas and apples are great for baking. For a low-fat alternative, applesauce can be used as a substitute for oil in baking. Peel, core and cook apples on low heat until tender, and purée.

Purée overripe fruits and make smoothies. Add fruits, berries, a banana, skimmed yoghurt and milk. Blend well.

Make it: Dining out and packaged foods are a big expense in comparison to home-cooked meals. Packaged foods are also higher in fat, sodium, calories and preservatives and lower in vitamins and minerals. Making meals from scratch may be inconvenient and time-consuming but it is worth the effort in terms of cost and nutrition.

Buy in bulk and watch specials: A great way to save money is to buy larger units — a cheaper alternative to buying individual items. The Fruit and Vegetable Market in Dubai is worth a visit.

Choose a generic brand instead of expensive, well-known brands. Be on the lookout for discounts on meat, poultry and seafood. Many foods can be stored in the freezer for months. If space permits, stock up during specials.

— *Bernadette Abraham is a certified fitness professional*