

The USDA's Healthy Eating on a Budget Program: Making Better Eating Decisions on a Budget

Abstract

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has launched a new interactive online program titled Healthy Eating on a Budget. It is an addition to the popular ChooseMyPlate.gov programs, such as the SuperTracker program. The Healthy Eating on a Budget program helps consumers plan, purchase, and prepare healthful meals. This article discusses materials and resources that are available as part of the Healthy Eating on a Budget program and provides suggestions for ways in which Extension professionals who teach consumers how to improve their nutrition and make nutrition affordable can use the program.

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Introduction

Eating a healthful diet can reduce mortality as well as the risks of heart disease (Siewe, 2001) and cancer (Cason, 2005; Catsburg, Miller, & Rohan, 2014). Low-income families, however, are less likely to eat healthful diets (Wang et al., 2014). In response to this situation, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has launched the Healthy Eating on a Budget program (<http://www.choosemyplate.gov/healthy-eating-on-budget.html>), a website that provides tips and strategies to help families save money and plan more healthful diets. The program is an addition to the popular ChooseMyPlate.gov programs, such as SuperTracker (Hongu et al., 2014). This article describes action-oriented content on the Healthy Eating on a Budget website, which is useful for nutrition and health educators and family and consumer sciences Extension professionals.

Program Description

The Healthy Eating on a Budget program provides information in a practical and sequential order to help consumers with three critical aspects of the food decision process: planning before grocery shopping, purchasing foods, and preparing meals. The program website provides information on various topics (e.g., Sample 2-Week Menus, Resources for Professionals, Tip of the Week) and includes content that is free to download and can be printed and used as teaching materials. This

article describes three topics from the website—Create a Grocery Game Plan, Shop Smart to Fill Your Cart, and Prepare Healthy Meals—and provides ideas about how to use the materials related to these topics as Extension educational tools.

Planning Before Grocery Shopping

Materials for the topic Create a Grocery Game Plan center on three recommendations:

- List your weekly meals.
- Make a grocery list.
- Save money at the store.

This section of the website suggests that the program participant first take an inventory of food items on-hand in his or her freezer, cabinets, and refrigerator and then create a weekly meal plan by using the printable worksheet Create a Grocery Game Plan Weekly Calendar. The participant completes the worksheet by recording ideas for breakfast, lunch, dinner, and snacks to be made during the coming week. Using the inventory list and weekly meal calendar, the participant then generates a grocery list by using the printable worksheet Grocery List, which is organized by food group. By implementing these steps (Figure 1), program participants get a start on eating healthfully on a budget by planning properly before heading to the grocery store.

Figure 1.

Steps for Creating a Grocery Game Plan Before Grocery Shopping



Extension educators may be interested in sharing program tips for how to save money at the grocery store, such as "eat before you shop," "read the sales flyer," "use coupons," and so forth. The 10 Tips Nutrition Education Series on eating better on a budget and saving money at the grocery store are posted on the website in both English and Spanish.

Purchasing Foods

The second topic, Shop Smart to Fill Your Cart, involves the following subtopics: Tips for Every Aisle, Understand the Price Tag, and Read the Food Label. This section of the website helps program participants find the most healthful and budget-friendly food items on their grocery lists. The Tips for Every Aisle subsection identifies low-cost food options in each aisle of the grocery store, organized by food group (fruits and vegetables, grains, protein foods, dairy, and others). For example, the website materials include the recommendation to buy in-season fruits and vegetables because they are less expensive and at their peak flavor. The other two subtopics are tutorials about how to read price tags and food labels. Specific emphasis is placed on understanding the

difference between the retail price and the unit price of a product. The unit price can be used to conveniently compare two products that are offered in different quantities, as exemplified in Figure 2, which shows that the milk with the unit price of \$0.02/oz is the better buy.

Figure 2.

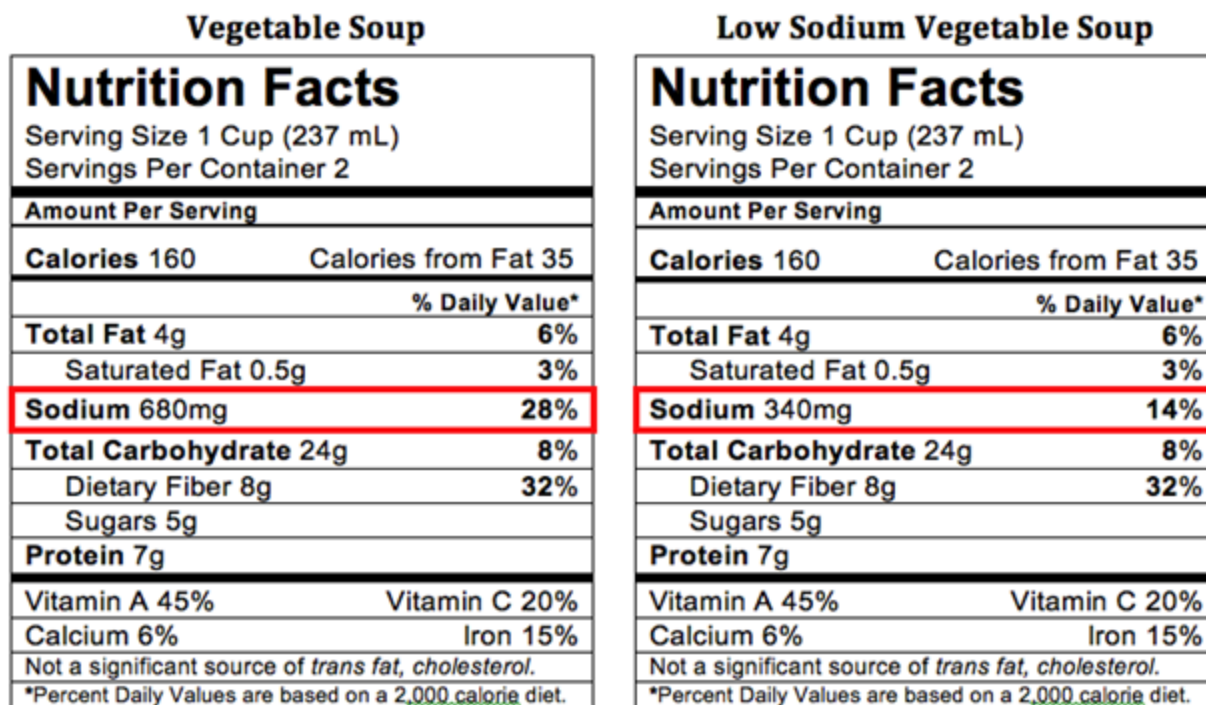
Comparing Price Tags to Determine Which Product Is the Better Buy



The Read the Food Label subsection explains how consumers can compare the nutritional values of two products. As seen in Figure 3, an example shows two soup labels and indicates that low-sodium vegetable soup is the more healthful choice because it contains 14% sodium instead of 28% sodium.

Figure 3.

Using a Nutrition Label to Compare Similar Products



Preparing Meals

The third topic, Prepare Healthy Meals, involves the subtopics Kitchen Time-Savers, Cooking for Your Family, and Tasty and Low-Cost Recipes. This section of the website offers information about ways to make healthful meal preparation and cooking enjoyable and stress-free. Practical tips for saving time—such as cleaning as you prepare, chopping extra vegetables, and doubling recipes—are easy to incorporate into a daily routine and could make a difference in the amount of time and hassle associated with preparing and cooking meals. Tips for preparing meals for a large family also are included. The Tasty and Low-Cost Recipes section introduces the What's Cooking? USDA Mixing Bowl recipe website. This site can be used to find low-cost recipes for household-sized quantities. The search function allows users to filter recipes by course (e.g., appetizers, main dishes, side dishes), cooking equipment (e.g., blender, grill, microwave, stove top), food groups (i.e., fruits, vegetable, grains, protein foods, and dairy), nutrition focus (e.g., reduced sodium, less saturated fat), cuisine type (e.g., American, Asian, Hispanic), and USDA programs (e.g., Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program [SNAP], Child Nutrition). The website offers printable recipe cards and options to save recipes to a cookbook and share recipes via social media.

Conclusions

Each part of the Healthy Eating on a Budget website provides Extension educators and individual users with resources and tools related to planning meals, shopping smart at the grocery store, and preparing meals that are enjoyable and affordable. The website offers strategies that Extension educators can use to empower low-income families to purchase foods and eat well on a budget.

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