

My kids love applesauce. When I go to the grocery store to make my selection, I could easily become overwhelmed with all the choices. There is “old fashioned” applesauce, “organic” applesauce, “berry-flavored” applesauce, not to mention applesauce in snack cups or squeeze packages. Fortunately, my kids don’t want the flavored kind, just plain original applesauce. Even with that limitation, a person could spend a lot of money on applesauce!

Since I balance my food dollars against a pre-planned monthly budget, I have to be careful with every purchase I make at the store. In order to make my food dollar stretch and work within my budget, I keep 3 principles in mind: Planning, Purchasing, and Preparing. Here are some tips I use that might help you stretch your food dollar.

Planning: At an early age, I learned that you should never shop when you are hungry. Planning ahead will help you resist impulsive hunger-driven decisions. Begin by planning your meals and snacks for a week at a time (with your budget in mind, of course!). Simply writing them on a calendar is a great place to start.

Make sure you have recipes handy for each of your meals. To reduce stress and time commitment, pick recipes that are quick and easy to prepare. Look for meals that will stretch expensive food items. Stews, casseroles, and stir-fries will help your meat extend further. Minimize the use of “ready-made” foods available in the store’s deli or through the fast food drive-thru for additional savings.

Make a grocery list and compare that list against the sale ads from the local paper. You can also look at the store-specific ads online. Consider the cost savings of using a store that has a loyalty card. Although the savings they provide might seem small, over the course of several trips to the store, you can save significant money.

Purchasing: Get the most value out of your budget by being a smart shopper. In addition to not shopping when you are hungry, do your shopping when you have adequate time to complete the task. Begin your shopping trip with non-perishable items. Save the refrigerated and freezer food items for the very last. Even in these winter months, it is wise to bring a cooler to put the cold items in until you arrive home. Make sure you put these items away first when you get home. Proper and immediate storage will help the food last longer.

Stick to your pre-planned purchases. Avoid grocery store aisles that have nothing on your list. This will help you resist impulse purchases that add to your food bill.

Use coupons from the newspaper or those you can access online. If you have a specific name-brand food item you need, go to that product's webpage to see if they have a coupon that you can use. I do this with the applesauce my kids want. They have a brand that they prefer over the store brand. If I can find a coupon for it, I will purchase the name brand. No coupon = no name brand. Try to match your coupons up with the items on your list that are on sale to help you save even more!

Find and compare unit prices listed on the shelves to get the best price (see illustration.) Unit pricing "levels the playing field for all of the options and tells you how prices compare based on an equal unit of measurement (pounds, ounces, liters, etc.)."

source: moneymanagement.org

Typically, larger quantities are less expensive by unit than the small packages are. Additionally, name brand products are usually more expensive than store brand packages of equal size. See the cost comparison chart provided.

FLOUR	2 lb. bag		5 lb. bag		25 lb. bag	
	Total Cost	Cost per lb.	Total Cost	Cost per lb.	Total Cost	Cost per lb.
Name Brand	\$1.68	\$.84	\$2.46	\$.49	\$12.18	\$.48
Store Brand	Not available	Not available	\$1.69	\$.34	\$8.44	\$.34

To calculate unit price, you divide the total price by the unit of measure identified on the package. For example, to calculate the unit cost of the 2 lb. bag of name brand flour you take \$1.68 (total cost) and divide by 2 (the # of lbs. in the package) which equals \$.84/lb.

Preparing:

Making meals "from scratch" has consistently proven to be less expensive than buying meals from a box or frozen meals. If you need budget-savvy recipes and nutritional-wise meal ideas, stop by the Geary County Extension office. Some meals can be prepared in advance. Take advantage of the days when you have time to cook. Double or triple the recipes and freeze meal-sized containers of soups and casseroles. You could divide leftovers into individual portions and freeze them for use at work or if eating alone. Occasionally substitute beans and peas for the more expensive protein-rich foods, such as meats. Use leftovers in meals later in the week. Throwing away food that could have been used in a meal will destroy the efficiency of all the effort you have taken to live within your food budget.

If you need some new ideas for healthy meals, check out the free community nutrition classes being offered at the 12th Street Community Center the first Tuesday of each month. Call their office to pre-register for the next monthly class – February 3.

For more information about healthy eating, healthy living, and healthy budgets, contact me at the Geary County K-State Research and Extension office at 785-238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!