

Healthy eating as the costs of living rise

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Every visit to the grocery store is bringing new price shocks as South African consumers find themselves in a battle to make ends meet each month. The grim news is that fuel and food prices are expected to continue to rise over the second half of this year, keeping lower and middle income consumers under considerable, sustained financial stress.



According to Maria van der Merwe, president of Adsa (The Association for Dietetics in South Africa), the South African food and non-alcoholic consumer price index has been increasing at a higher rate than the headline consumer price index since April 2020. She says: "This implies that the proportional cost of food has been increasing more than other consumer goods and more than household income. We have seen that the price of sunflower oil, chicken, beef offal, instant coffee, oranges, dried beans, and cheddar cheese all increased by more than 10% on a year-to-year basis from April 2021 to April 2022, compared to the 6% upper annual inflation band of the South African Reserve Bank.

"If you haven't yet taken a good look at your household budget to find ways to cut costs, this may be a good time to get this done. The key when it comes to your family food budget is to reduce and contain costs without giving in on quality. Registered dietitian, Zitandile Mfono says: "There's never been a better time to put your focus on nutrient-rich foods. What you want to do is find financial savings by cutting back on those foods that are nutrient-poor and energy dense that are working against the aim of your family making healthy food choices. Reducing your purchases of low nutrient density snack foods, sugary drinks, sweets, take-away meals and store-bought baked goods will free up some of your budget so that you can more easily afford a varied nutrient dense diet. What you want to avoid is swapping out quality, nutritious food items for cheaper ones that offer you less nutritional benefits. It is entirely possible to tighten your belt and still eat healthily."

If you don't already have one, drawing up a monthly food budget is the first step to finding savings and avoiding shocks at the supermarket till. Simply changing some of your food shopping habits can help you get a significant amount of additional value. Planning ahead for your meals enables you to be specific about what you buy, reduces impulse spending and food waste, and allows you to take advantage of deals and specials. Changing to less expensive brands, swapping out expensive ingredients for affordable ones and buying in bulk where possible can result in many small savings that add up to a lot by the end of the month. Cooking from scratch and preparing more meals at home is not just more affordable, but also fosters more healthy eating.

Mfono says: "What's important is that there are many ways that we can stretch the food budget without compromising on nutritional quality. This is the time to take steps to reduce your household's food waste and make sure that you are storing

food in your kitchen correctly. Just one example is storing potatoes in a brown paper bag in a cool, dark cupboard. They can last for up to a month without turning green, deteriorating and developing buds. Well-organised fridge and freezer spaces enable you to shop and cook in bulk, saving you time and reducing your fuel and energy costs while avoiding food waste.”

Registered dietitian, Retha Harmse who serves on the Adsa executive committee, provides these tips for healthy eating on a tight budget:

Don't cut back on vegetables and fruit

- Remember that fresh produce is VAT free!
- Focus on eating fresh vegetables and fruits that are in season
- Choose whole vegetable and fruit options as sliced, prepared and pre-packaged come at higher prices
- Form a grocery group with friends, family and neighbours so that you can buy vegetables and fruits in bulk and share amongst your households
- Look for specials on frozen vegetables and stock up if you have freezer space
- Grow your own greens at home or in your neighbourhood

Get wise about grains and cereals

- Focus on fibre-rich whole-grain options such as wholewheat bread and brown rice. They keep you fuller for longer and provide essential nutrients
- Be aware that ready-to-eat cereals can cost more than double the price of oats or maize meal. Maize has the added benefit of being fortified with essential nutrients and oats is an excellent source of fibre and will keep you fuller for longer
- Dry goods can be stored for long periods, so buy in bulk and look out for special deals
- Try to include a variety of grains in your diet, such as millet and pearled barley, pearled wheat and sorghum.

Expand your source of proteins

- The protein component of a meal is likely to be the most expensive food item, so cutting back on red meat, chicken and fresh fish intake is often the easiest way to reduce your food cost. While protein-rich foods are important in a healthy diet, there are sources other than meat, such as eggs, dairy, beans, lentils and chickpeas
- Have at least one meat-free day during the week and eat plant-based proteins such as soya, beans and lentils instead, along with a wholegrain starch
- Nutritious beans or lentils can also be added to meat dishes such as mincemeat, curries, soups and stews to make the meat go much further while adding to the nutritional value of your meal
- Consider tinned fish such as tuna, pilchards or sardines if fresh fish is not available or affordable
- Milk sold in plastic sachets is often cheaper than milk in bottles or cartons
- Buy the large tub of yoghurt as this is cheaper than buying packs of smaller portions

Use fats sparingly

- This is an important guideline for healthy eating and the soaring prices of cooking oils are a good motivation to put it into practice
- Look for ways to reduce frying foods by steaming, boiling, microwaving and grilling instead
- Use small amounts of canola oil when cooking, which has a similar composition of healthy unsaturated fats compared to more expensive options like olive, nut or avocado oils.

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