Unit 3 Food Choices: Economics
Lesson 3: Getting the Most for Your Food Dollar

“Food is an important part of a balanced diet’

Introduction
According to Schlenker and Long, individuals and families need help to make suitable diet-related decisions. Health and wellness education must focus on goals and strategies for success to help families in economic stress secure correct amounts of food. According to Gail Frank, nutrition policy should include a way to “ensure food access and availability to those lacking resources or the ability to obtain sufficient foods” (2008, page 244, ¶1).

Whitney & Rolfes point out “To plan a diet that achieves all of the dietary ideals...a person needs tools as well as knowledge” (2002, page 35, ¶3-4).

A well planned diet delivers adequate nutrients, a balanced array of nutrients, and an appropriate amount of energy. It is based on nutrient-sense foods, moderate in substances that can be detrimental to health, and varied in its selections (2002, page 35, ¶3-4).

Food Resources and Skills
“Two of the tools most widely used for diet planning are food group plans and exchange lists” (2002, page 35, ¶3-4) according to Whitney & Rolfes, the following guidelines can be used when assisting individuals and families to make appropriate diet-related food decisions:

- Food Group Plans: build a diet from clusters of foods similar in origin and nutrient content
- Daily Food Guide: USDA’s Daily Food Guide
- Notable Nutrients: A method of substitution among food groups for nutrient intake
- Miscellaneous Foods: Foods such as salad dressings, jams and alcoholic beverages high in fat, sugar or alcohol with few nutrients and which should be used sparingly
- Mixtures of Foods: Foods falling into two or more food groups such as casseroles, soups, and sandwiches
- Nutrient Density: The amount of kcalorie (energy) or energy intake among various foods within the food groups

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• Recommended Servings: The recommended numbers of daily servings of food to provide the amount of food energy to an individual based on age and physical activity levels
• Serving Sizes: Recommended serving sizes for standard foods within each group
• Food Guide Pyramid: Graphic depiction of the Daily Food Guide
• Vegetarian Good Guide: For people who do not eat meats or milk products to create an adequate diet.
• Ethnic Food Choices: People can use the Food Guide Pyramid and sort ethnic foods into the applicable food groups
• Perceptions and Actual Intakes: Use of the Daily Food Guide and the Food Group Pyramid to self-determine whether adults are actually selecting foods that reflect the recommendations of the Food Group Pyramid or only think they are adhering to appropriate nutritional recommendations.

(2002, pgs 35-40)

Learning to Shop: Read the Labels
Learning to read food labels is an important part of learning to shop wisely and to select foods with less fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, and sodium and more complex carbohydrates and dietary fiber (Whitney & Rolfes, 2002, page 50, ¶1).

According to Schlenker & Long, learning how to read food labels is an acquired skill; individual and family food shoppers must learn to use nutrition education programs (such as the Food Stamp program, WIC (women, infants and children) and the USDA Dietary Guide for Americans) to foods to provide a healthy diet for individuals and families may take longer than the actual preparation of the food (Schlenker & Long, 2008, page 256).

On the other hand, food labels can be difficult to interpret due to the influence of the food industry in labeling foods. On example is the ‘heart healthy’ food labeling proposal. (Nestle, 2007, page 123, ¶2). The ‘heart healthy’ program was initiated in 1988 by the American Heart Association (AHA) as a way to label foods that promoted ‘low-fat’ foods by affixing a logo consisting of a red heart with a white check mark and the words “American Heart Association Tested and Approved.” The logo alerted consumers to the testing and approved of “…certain foods that met standards for content of fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, and sodium (Nestle, 2007, page 123, ¶2).

According to Nestle, the AHA proposal “…immediately ran into opposition from the USDA officials concerned that identifying single foods as heart-healthy distorted basic principles of good nutrition, which depend on overall dietary patterns” (Nestle, 2007, page 123, ¶2). An additional complication related to timing; the USDA was in the midst of developing new labeling rules for Americans. The proposal for ‘heart healthy’ labeling won approval from the USDA in 1993 after revising the standards

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for content of foods to follow Food and Drug Administration (FDA) guidelines (Nestle, 2007, pages 123-124).\(^\text{11}\)

**Food Labels**

A food label lists ingredients contained in a foodstuff. The order in which the ingredient appears designates the amount of that ingredient in the food from the most to the least. For example, Powdered Grape Drink:

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Sugar, citric acid (provides tartness), natural and artificial flavor, artificial color, vitamin C.
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This label tells you:
- Mostly sugar
- No juice at all
- Vitamin C added, plus other things

(Schlenker & Long, 2008, page 259)\(^\text{12}\)

**Figure 1: Example of food label conforming with NLEA (USA Nutrition Labeling and Education Act) requirement.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nutrition Facts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Serving Size 1 cup (228g)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Servings Per Container 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Amount Per Serving</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Calories 90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% Daily Value*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Fat</strong> 3g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saturated Fat 0g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cholesterol</strong> 0mg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sodium</strong> 300mg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Carbohydrate</strong> 13g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dietary Fiber 3g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sugars 3g</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


### Protein 3g

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vitamin A 80%</th>
<th>Vitamin C 60%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Calcium 4%</td>
<td>Iron 4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000 calorie diet. Your daily values may be higher or lower depending on your calorie needs:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Calories:</th>
<th>2,000</th>
<th>2,500</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Fat</td>
<td>Less than 65g</td>
<td>80g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sat Fat</td>
<td>Less than 20g</td>
<td>25g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cholesterol</td>
<td>Less than 300mg</td>
<td>300mg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sodium</td>
<td>Less than 2,400mg</td>
<td>2,400mg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Carbohydrate</td>
<td>300g</td>
<td>375g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dietary Fiber</td>
<td>25g</td>
<td>30g</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Calories per gram:
- Fat 9
- Carbohydrate 4
- Protein 4

**NATIONAL FOOD PROCESSORS ASSOCIATION**
in cooperation with FDA and FSIS

### Unit Pricing

According to Schlenker & Long, "The unit price is the price per pound, ounce, quart, or other unit. Unit price labels can be found on the display shelves or below canned and packaged foods. By comparing prices using a 'per unit' cost factor, consumers can locate foods that cost the least amount per unit (2008, page 258, Box 10-5, Unit Pricing)."

According to the NIBBLE Project, sponsored by the University of Massachusetts, Amherst related to unit pricing:

Sometimes foods packed in the "giant" or "family" size may seem like the best buy. You may think that buying one large container will not cost as much as two or three smaller packages. But larger containers do not always end up costing you less than smaller ones. It is important to look at the cost per unit and compare this cost. The "unit price" tells you the cost per pound, quart, or other unit of weight or volume of a food package. It is usually posted on the shelf below the food. The shelf tag shows the total price (item price) and price per unit (unit price) for the food item.

You can save money when you compare the cost of the same food in different sized containers or different brands. For example, if you want to buy frozen orange juice you may find a 6-ounce can that cost $.64. The unit price for this small can is $3.42 per quart. A 12-ounce can of frozen orange juice in another

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13 FAO. (n.d.) Figure 1. Example of food label conforming with NLEA requirement. Retrieved April 13, 2008 from [http://www.fao.org/docrep/008/af282e/AF282E03.htm](http://www.fao.org/docrep/008/af282e/AF282E03.htm)
14 Ibid.
brand may cost $.89. The unit price for the larger container of juice is listed as $2.38 per quart. Here, the larger container is cheaper per quart.

Foods that cost less per unit are not always the better buy. The big, economy size is not a good buy if you cannot store it properly. If you end up with leftovers that spoil or are thrown out, buying the larger size is not a good idea.

Unit pricing can help you decide what brand to buy. Store brands and little known brands often cost less than well-known national brands. The way the lower-priced brands look may be the only difference. (Be sure to check the Nutrition Facts panel on the food label to see if the nutrients are the same.) Sometimes these foods may vary in size, color, or texture more than the national brands. If you want a perfect peach half you may want to pay the price of a national brand. If you want sliced peaches to serve your child or as a quick snack, it may not matter if each slice is the same. You can save money when you compare the unit price of each of the canned peaches before you make your decision (n.d.)

Getting What You Pay For

According to the White Plains, NY, Department of Consumer Protection, Weights and Measures “Food is a large part of a family budget. To make the best choices and to get the most for your money, it is important to compare the price, amount, and quality of similar products” (n.d.)

The White Plains, NY Department of Consumer Protection guideline to unit pricing follows:

Unit pricing can help. The unit price tells you the costs “unit’ (such as per ounce, per pound, per sheet) to buy the product.

It's easy to find the unit prices of some items. It may be marked on a sign near the item. For example:

- If apples sell for $.89 per pound, you know that 5 pounds will cost $4.45 (5 pounds x 89 cents).
- If potato salad sells at the deli counter for $2.59 per pound, you know that 2 pounds will cost $5.18 (2 x $2.59).

Unit pricing is most helpful when the price per unit isn't so clear. Let's look at an example. Your favorite brand of corn flakes is sold in three different sizes.
- The 14-ounce box is $2.52.
- The 20-ounce box is $3.00.
- The 2-pound (32-ounce) box is $5.12.

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Which one is the best buy? Unit pricing helps. (In this case, the unit price is the price per ounce)

To figure the unit price, divide the price by the number of units (in this example, it's the number of ounces):

- The unit price for the 14-ounce box is 18 cents per ounce ($2.52 / 14).
- The unit price for the 20-ounce box is 15 cents per ounce ($3.00 / 20).
- The unit price for the 2-pound box is 16 cents per ounce (2 pounds = 32 ounces, $5.12 / 32).

Compare the unit price of each package. Which cost less per unit?

In this example, the 20-ounce package is the best buy because it cost less per ounce.

Remember, the larger the package is not always the best buy. It pays to know the unit price.

Corn flakes are also sold in the bulk food section for $1.44 per pound (one pound = 16 ounces). Divide $1.44 by 16 and you know the cost per ounce is 9 cents. ($1.44 / 16 = $.09).

How does the unit price of the boxed corned flakes compare with the unit price of the corn flakes sold in the bulk food section? In this example, the unit price shows that corn flakes from the bulk food section are the better buy.

When you know the unit price, you can compare similar products of different sizes. Many states require supermarkets to mark the unit price on the shelves or the price tags. Other states may require that the information given be correct and easy to understand. If you find that a label or tag is missing or is incorrect, report it to the store manager immediately (Department of Consumer Protection, n.d.)

**Example of Unit Pricing**

According to the White Plans, NY Department of Consumer Protection, "Unit price labels may look like these"  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unit Price Per LB.</th>
<th>You Pay</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>$2.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A 0407006</td>
<td>Canned Beans 16oz.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Stretching Your Food Dollars

Oregon State University’s Web site Eat Well for Less, provides timely information to consumers looking to ‘stretch their food dollar’ by avoiding fast food and cooking at home.

These days, many of us would say we are too busy to cook meals from scratch — in fact, most Americans eat fast food and convenience foods regularly. Why not?


When we are busy, we forget to plan ahead. At the end of a long day, we’re too hungry and have too little time to make a home-cooked meal. The problem is, eating fast foods and convenience foods regularly leads to poor health, and also can use up our food budget very quickly! Fast foods and convenience foods are often higher in fat, salt and sugar. They are more expensive, too.

Stretching your food dollars can mean using good strategies at home and at the grocery store. First, we’ll look at strategies you can use at home. Second, we’ll look at strategies you can use when you go to the grocery store (2008).

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21 Ibid.

Strategies at Home

Source: Oregon State University.  
http://extension.oregonstate.edu/fcd/nutrition/ewfl/module_03/intro_02.php 
2008. Compiled by K. Cavanaugh

Stretching your food dollars doesn’t begin when you get to the store, it begins at home. Spending a small amount of time planning ahead can save money later.  
Let’s look at some quick, easy tools you can use at home:  
- Plan a Food Budget  
- Take Inventory  
- Check the Ads  
- What to Cook?  
- Planning Ahead  
- Make a List (Oregon State University, 2008).  

Summary  
According to Schlenker and Long, families need to be educated as to how to shop wisely. Planning ahead may save time with food shopping by planning meals for the entire week and then developing a shopping list.  
Preparing a market list ahead of time helps avoid impulse buying and extra trips to the grocery store. When planning meals, consider the food on hand and how perishable items can be used to avoid waste. Checking local newspapers or store flyers for specials can target those items... that may be at a reduced cost. (2008, page 257, ¶1).  

Buying wisely means comparison shopping using unit pricing and reading labels to obtain the most nutrition for the money. Purchase in-season fresh fruits and vegetables because they are lower in price (Schlenker & Long, 2008, page 257, ¶1).  

The following sources of groceries are among the choices for consumers:  
1. Retail grocery stores

23Ibid.  
24Ibid.  
2. Farmers’ markets
3. Consumer cooperatives
4. Food discount stores
5. Food banks

(Schlenker & Long, 2008, page 262, ¶2-5).\textsuperscript{26}

Educational support to individuals and families can lead to positive changes in nutrient intake and help consumers make the most of their food dollar.

\textsuperscript{26}Ibid.