

Transcript Season 2 Episode 5 : Low Cost Food – More Than Ramen Noodles

Hello, I'm Casey Ford, and I'm the Franklin County Family Consumer Sciences agent with the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture Cooperative Extension Service. The rising cost of food is a common topic of conversation and on the news many Americans are really looking for ways to stretch their food budget. I think this is especially true for young adults with limited income and small kitchens as they look for low cost food options that work for their lives.

Podcast Opener:

Adulting, thinking of all the things adults have to do, can be intimidating. Maybe you are realizing just how much you don't know about living on your own. If this sounds familiar. Join us today to learn the skills you need and take some of the stress out of being an adult. This is Grown Up U, an adulting podcast to help you navigate the twist and turns of adult life. Listen and get life skills you didn't learn in school.

Podcast Script:

Casey Ford: Hello, Tristin, thank you so much for joining us. How are you today?

Tristin Bolton: I'm pretty good. It's been busy kind of trying to get my feet back under me with the New Year and the new month coming up and just, you know, it's busy.

Casey: So, the listeners know Tristin, you are the Crawford County Family Consumer Sciences agent here in Arkansas. And so, one big topic of conversation this past year has been the rising cost of food. I sure have noticed, and I'm sure you have too. A lot of Americans are looking for ways to cut their food costs.

Tristin: Oh, absolutely. And in line with what I've just said about being busy, I think that that applies to things as well. Everyone is feeling the cost of food, and young adults and college students are no exception to that. One thing that I hear a lot about is meal planning to help save money, and I know there's a lot of different ways that you can do it and it can be overwhelming to get started. I've been overwhelmed a few times, but Casey, I know you have a good meal planning routine. Can you describe how and why you got into that?

Casey: Absolutely. Early last year, I felt like I was turning to eating out way too often because I didn't want to cook when I got home. I was hungry now or I was running low on groceries, et cetera, et cetera. A big problem with that was that I was spending a lot of money on the

convenience of eating out, and I wasn't eating as healthy as I'd like to be. So, I decided to get started on a meal planning and preparation routine, and it's worked beautifully.

Tristin: Tell me what you do. Do you have a rotation of meals that you make or do you meal plan before you make your grocery list? Or do you buy all your groceries first and then make it? Like, I'm just not really sure the best way to get started.

Casey: Great question. The first thing I do is that I look at food that I have that is going to go bad first. I usually do this Thursday. This may be food that was left over from a recipe that I made the previous weekend or earlier in the week. Or it might be food that have been given to me, such as produce from a friend or family member's garden. I try to think of recipes that I can make to use up this food before it goes bad.

I also ask my husband to make a suggestion for what he wants to eat. I have some favorite recipes that I make pretty often, but I also sometimes try a new recipe. I have found that leftover vegetables go great in soups and salads, and that this can be a faster way to use them before they go bad.

When I look at recipes, I usually freeze a lot of the meals that I make so that I can just take them out of the freezer and have a thaw in the fridge the night before I make them. So, I'm just looking at recipes that freeze well a lot.

And then I take the recipes that I have - I usually just pick three recipes to do on a weekend, and I check my fridge, my freezer, my pantry to see what I have and what I need to buy. Then on Friday, I put in my order or grocery store pick up.

I like the pickups for the time saving purposes, but going into the store, it's always an option to remember to add other things you need on the list. So, for example, I always need a quick breakfast, so I'm always picking up my favorite granola bars. I also, it's also good to think about healthy snack and side dish options.

When I do go in the store, I take a picture of my shopping list with my cell phone because I sometimes forget the list. And when I don't have the list, I forget items or buy items I don't need, and I end up spending more money than I have to. I have a part of my regular routine to do grocery pickup and then prep the meals on Saturdays. Then I have meals ready for the week, and I'm not spending that extra money on eating out.

Tristin: I love what you just said about taking a picture of your grocery list on your cell phone. That's a great idea because oftentimes I have to go back to the car or find my list in my purse, or I just forgot it completely.

So, I've also heard that there are of people that do just a few meals at a time the next day or throughout the week, or just double the portion of the meals that they're already making so

that they have leftovers the next day or throughout the week, I think it's a great place to start if you're overwhelmed and if maybe a whole week is too much at one time.

I would also like to add the Extension's resources are always reliable sources for recipes. So specifically, here in Arkansas, you can get a hold of your Family and Consumer Sciences Agent. You can also visit our website at www.uaex.uada.edu.

You mentioned making sure that you pick up some healthy snacks and side dish options. So now that we're getting maybe just some warmer weather in spring and into summer and then into fall, there's a lot of different fruits and vegetables that are in season here.

For example, spinach is in season now here in Arkansas, and strawberries will be here pretty soon. It's less expensive to buy produce when it's in season. Also, the further we move into spring, there'll start to be some farmer's markets and some other options that are in our communities that you can buy produce at. I always recommend checking those out as you can get some good prices and support your local farmers and neighbors.

Casey: Absolutely. I also want to say that canned and frozen fruit and vegetables are also an inexpensive and healthy option. Buying produce when it is not in season can be pretty pricey, but canned and frozen fruits and vegetables can be your answer to getting the fiber, vitamins, and minerals they offer when it's hard to get produce in season.

So, when looking for canned foods, look for fruit that's canned in 100 percent juice and for no salt added vegetables. When looking for frozen fruits and vegetables, look for vegetables with no sauce or for unsweetened fruit. You can always sweeten it and season it on your own to your taste preferences once you have it in your kitchen and you would likely still be cutting down on that added sugar and sodium.

Speaking of canned and frozen foods, I like to keep some things on hand in my freezer and pantry because I use them a lot and they are able to be stored for quite a while. But do you have to keep in your pantry, Tristin?

Tristin: Oh yeah, I keep my pantry stocked because that can be a lifesaver and can save me a lot of time and possibly a trip to the store.

Some of the things that I keep in my pantry, are corn - I always have canned corn and green beans, carrots, if you like green peas, that's a good option, too.

You can also keep onions, potatoes. Those are some fresh things.

And a new thing that I've really started keeping in my pantry is sweet potatoes. So, cooking them, that's been a good option for us and spaghetti sauce. I always have spaghetti sauce or tomato paste so that I can make my own.

Fruit, you know, you maybe you have applesauce, you have some dried fruit.

There's a lot of options there and other canned goods that I keep - cream of chicken, cream of mushroom. You can use those a lot of times and casseroles, chicken stock or vegetable stock. I always have a container of that in my pantry.

And don't forget about your protein. So maybe it's canned tuna or chicken or salmon. And of course, peanut butter. Peanut butter is a great source of protein that is relatively inexpensive that you can keep in your pantry. You know, and too, as far as protein goes, if you don't have a lot of freezer space, especially college students, maybe you live in the dorm, you have a mini fridge. It's not really an option for you to keep some frozen protein, but you can have these shelf stable options as well.

Keeping in line with our conversation about snacks and things that you can kind of grab and go - some of your favorite cereal, look for that whole grain there. Quick cooking oats, oatmeal granola bars again, that dried fruit, pasta, crackers. I mean, the list goes on and on of some of those shelf stable things that you can keep in your pantry.

But one thing that I have ran into lately in my own home is not always thinking about a supply of those herbs and spices, cooking oil, baking ingredients like flour, sugar, lemon juice, different types of vinegar. Sometimes you don't always have room for that, but if you have the option, those are some items that you may want to keep on hand that just kind of helpful. I mean, there's a lot of options as far as stocking that pantry.

Casey: So that was great. I like to keep some of my favorite canned soup, some favorite boxed meals and some favorite frozen meals on hand as well. Because, you know, sometimes life happens. And as good as my meal planning routine is, a few weeks ago I had to go out of town for a funeral. So, it was over the weekend I was gone, and I didn't do any meal prepping then. So, I came back, and I was back to work, but my meal prepping routine was out of whack.

And so having that well-stocked kitchen saves me money because I have some quick meals on hand or have some supplies to make some really quick and easy meals. So even if my routine is kind of out of whack, I can still make a quick meal and I don't have to go out. And I want to emphasize that I don't think a well-stocked kitchen happens overnight. This is something that you build up to.

Tristin: Oh, absolutely. I think of, you know, when I went to college or when I moved out on my own for the first time and the idea of stocking your kitchen right off the bat is very overwhelming and a big expense all at once. As you start meal prepping and you kind of start getting in this routine and habit, I think you'll get an idea of what you need the most and what you use most often.

So, it's just really something to strive for. It's that goal that you can set having that regular shopping and meal prepping routine. Maybe just pick up one or two items every time you go to the store that's on that list that you're looking for.

You can also save money by monitoring the grocery store sales ads, pick up items as they come up on sale, and sometimes you can buy shelf stable items in bulk, so maybe a large pack of something.

I often find when I can get things in bulk, that sticker price, of course, is higher than the unit price, but the price per ounce is lower and that's really where you save that money. So doing that cost comparison can help you.

Casey: So, you're saying that you're looking for like the cheaper unit price, the unit price is the price per ounce. So that's a great point when it comes to cutting costs on groceries.

One thing I say over and over again when I talk on this topic is that you pay for preparation. So, if you get produce that is pre-cut or pre-washed, it's going to be more expensive per ounce than getting produce that you need to wash and cut yourself. So that applies to canned beans versus dried beans; boneless, skinless chicken breasts vs. a whole chicken, shredded or sliced cheese versus a block of cheese. When you buy food that has had preparation done to it, you're paying for convenience and time, and that's a decision that you have to make as a consumer.

And for one last money saving grocery store trip tip, I always like to remind people that often, the store brand of food is less expensive than the name brand, so be open to trying out the store brand. You may not notice a difference in taste.

And I know that a lot of our listeners may have a smaller kitchen and only some basic kitchen utensils. What are some dishes that you think that they should try out?

Tristin: Yeah, so that's a really great question. And before we kind of get into that answer, I want to take an opportunity to mention again that many of our family consumer science agents here in Arkansas have some SNAP-Ed and EFNEP cooking schools that listeners can participate in. You just need to really contact your local county Extension office to see what programs they're offering.

Now, for some of those simple dishes, a veggie and brown rice is a really inexpensive meal. You can just cook some brown rice, add a bag of frozen, mixed vegetables with it. If you wanted to add some protein, maybe add some chicken. Canned chicken would work as well on this. So that's a really great option.

Smoothies are also good. If you have a blender, they always - add those vegetables. That's how you can kind of use some of that stuff that's already in your refrigerator. You know, we talked

earlier about more fruits and vegetables coming at a season, but in this regard, frozen works great, too. Bananas, berries, 100 percent fruit juice, leafy greens - that wilted spinach that you forgot about in the back of the refrigerator. It's an easy way to make those items go further.

Some other ideas might be breakfast burritos, soups, chilies, quick, easy things. Soup and chili are an easy way to use leftovers, not just the vegetables that we've talked about, but if you had leftover taco meat that could go into chili or maybe a vegetable beef soup. So, there's a lot of options. It's just really all about being thrifty.

Casey: Those are all great ideas. So, I know that a lot of our listeners are in college or they're getting ready for college, so they might think, "Well, this is great, but what can I make in my small kitchen?"

You know, they might just have a toaster or a mini fridge and a microwave, a lot of college students have a meal plan with their college or university – but, if you're looking for the option to have meals in your dorms, maybe just to supplement what you have with your meal plan – there are more options than ramen noodles.

Eggs can be done in a microwave quite conveniently, as can baked potatoes.

You can also make your own overnight oats, especially if you have a mini fridge. Use milk and quick oats.

You can also make some vegetable soup by putting together some canned vegetables, beans, and broth together. You can season it with herbs and spices and put it in a microwave bowl and then store your leftovers in the fridge. This recipe will require some storage, part of the storage your mini fridge has.

But all in all, there are still options for people with the smallest of kitchens. Well, Tristin, thank you so much for joining me today.

Tristin: Absolutely. Thank you so much for having me.

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