



Family Dining: The REAL Value Meal

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Families on tight budgets are making tough choices when it comes to the basics like providing good food. For busy parents juggling work, child care, and school, creating a tasty meal before bath and bedtime is a daily challenge. A quick trip through the drive-thru for a fast food value meal may be tempting. But the real value meal is still delivered through your home kitchen. With some planning and a better understanding of what foods are the best deal based on cost and nutrition, you can provide low-cost, nutritious meals for your family.

Cooking meals from scratch at home saves money and supports a healthy family. We compared the price and nutritional value of several fast food chain meals to similar meals made at home and you may find the results astonishing.

Home-cooked Vegetable Quesadilla Meal

Vegetable quesadilla, black beans, and 1% low fat milk: **\$1.04** per person (430 calories, 4g fat, 524mg sodium)

Fast Food Chicken Quesadilla Meal

Chicken quesadilla, pinto beans and cheese, and large soda: **\$5.69** per person (1,200 calories, 35g fat, 2,267mg sodium)

Home-cooked Chicken Meal

Rosemary lemon chicken, mixed vegetables, and 1% low fat milk: **\$2.50** per person (432 calories, 7g fat, 259mg sodium)

Fast Food Chicken Sandwich Meal

Chicken classic sandwich, medium french fries, and large soda: **\$7.01** per person (1,220 calories, 39g fat, 1,440mg sodium)

Not only are the home-cooked meals a better cost value, they also present a better dietary value. Home-cooked meals are nearly always lower in calories, fat, and sodium and are higher in fruits, vegetables, and milk than the fast food alternatives. This nutritional advantage can help decrease your family's risk of obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. You can't afford not to feed your family right!

The most important things you can do to be successful in making cost-effective home cooked meals is menu planning and shopping with a list (and sticking to it!). Your list allows you to buy only the items needed for your meals and prevents you from impulse buying and purchasing more premade items, which are usually more expensive. Having a meal plan makes cooking at home less frustrating, since you have a plan and the food items needed, rather than scrambling to "find something for dinner."

Eating healthy doesn't have to break the bank. The following tips will help you consider products for best nutritional value and cost. First, make fresh fruits and vegetables regulars on your shopping list. Fruits and vegetables are loaded with vitamins, minerals, and fiber that children need to stay healthy and usually cost less than 25 cents per serving. Buy only the amount you can use before they spoil, but enough to balance out meals and snacks. When fresh items are out of season and become more expensive, frozen or canned are smart alternatives.

With breads and grains, whole grains are your best choice. Whole grains are packed with nutrients including fiber. Fiber helps children feel full longer so they can focus in activities and at school. Some low-cost choices are oatmeal, brown rice, soft corn tortillas, and whole grain cold cereals. Avoid instant rice and oatmeal to save on money, sugar, salt, and calories.

Cereal	Calories	Fat	Fiber	Protein	Cost Per Ounce
Whole grain cereal with raisins	190	1g	8g	5g	9.9 cents
Fruit flavored cereal	160	1g	0g	1g	18 cents

When looking for the best deal for a low-fat protein, you can't beat beans! A cup of cooked beans can cost as little as 7 cents. Beans are a nutrition powerhouse and loaded with fiber, protein, and iron. Try replacing some meat dishes with bean dishes to save costs. When buying meat, choose chuck or bottom round roast over sirloin – it has less fat and is considerably cheaper. Check the prices of chicken in different forms – a whole chicken can be the most cost effective and, for the creative cook, provide enough meat for two or more recipes. Always read the small print - check the cost per unit when comparing prices!

Not choosing milk due to cost? Calcium consumption is critical during childhood and the teen years because this is when peak bone mass is formed. However, milk consumption is down and soda consumption has risen. This trend puts children at risk for bone fractures later in life and increased risk of obesity. In our cost comparisons, ounce per ounce, we discovered that a cup of milk costs between 12-23 cents per cup, and soda can cost between 12-55 cents per cup. Milk is a valuable family staple and it pays to eliminate soda.

Like any new skill, providing healthy foods to your family on a limited budget gets easier with practice. Concerned your children won't eat the food you make? Healthy habits are formed over time. Offering a variety of meal options will lead to some family favorites and you'll learn which staples to keep on hand. Home cooking will reduce the high expense of eating out and make drive-thru visits a "sometimes" excursion. Once these value meal basics are mastered, you can get ambitious and integrate new items and new tastes into your menus. Who knows? Maybe your next step is serving fresh vegetables picked from your own garden!

Deborah Peel is the Marketing and Communications Coordinator at First 5 Shasta, supporting the vision that all children are safe, healthy, and live in nurturing environments to reach their potential. She has a teenage daughter and two grown sons.

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