Grocery bill high? K-State expert shares tips on cutting costs

Make a plan, and get to the checkout stand, says Martin

By Pat Melgares, K-State Research and Extension news service

MANHATTAN, Kan. – If you’ve gasped at the grocery store checkout line recently, you’re probably not alone.

Inflation has hit American’s dinner table and it’s been painfully obvious on food eaten at home where consumers paid 11.9% more in May 2022 compared to May 2021, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

“It’s amazing,” said Lisa Martin, an extension agent in K-State Research and Extension’s Shawnee County office. “Every time I go to the store, something I normally buy has increased 50 cents or even a dollar.”

Martin notes that supply chain shortages, bottlenecks in shipping and transportation, and a tight labor pool have all contributed to rising food prices. “It’s a time when all of us really need to think about how much we are spending on food and ways we can cut back,” she said.

Some recommendations are not new, she said:

- Prepare a food budget; decide how much you are willing to spend.
- Make a grocery list before you go to the store.
- Plan menus, preferably for an entire week, but even a few days is recommended.
- Shop when you are well-rested; you make better decisions when you are rested.
- Eat before you go to cut back on impulse buying.

Then, Martin said, stick to the plan.
“Once you’ve gotten the items on your list, get to the checkout stand,” she said. “Statistics have shown – and it may be higher now – that for every minute you spend looking around the store, and before you get to the checkout register, you’re going to spend another $2 in food.

“If you’re looking around for five minutes, that’s another $10 on your grocery bill.”

Saving on food costs also includes eating everything you buy, Martin said. Food waste is a major contributor to lost money. Martin suggests making the grocery store your last stop before going home, and storing perishable foods in the refrigerator or freezer as soon as possible.

“One of the things I do with foods that I need to use up quickly is I store them toward the front of the refrigerator,” she said. “Or if there is something that can be stored at room temperature, keep them on the counter so that you can easily see them when you walk into the kitchen.”

To encourage good nutrition, look for fresh produce – which is more abundant during the summer – and buy whole grains, brown rice, and low sodium foods. Farmers Markets can be a good source for low-cost, nutritious food.

“People still think fresh is the best,” Martin said. “If it’s just been picked, harvested, and delivered to the grocery store, it’s going to be full of nutrition. But fruit and vegetables also are processed soon after harvesting, so canned and frozen foods are a good option as well.”

Other ways to battle rising food costs, according to Martin, include:

- Shop when the store isn’t crowded.
- Compare prices between stores; changing grocers may save you money.
- Consider food co-ops and warehouse stores.
- Sign up for loyalty programs, if offered.
- Use coupons, but only on products you already use.
- Shop sale items as much as possible.
- Substitute ingredients when you find them on sale.
- Look up and look down: Eye-level products are usually more expensive.
- Be wary of displays on the end caps; those items may not be on sale.
- Read the use-by dates on foods to make sure they are fresh.
- Keep a running total as you shop.

Martin, whose job includes coordinating the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Education Program (SNAP-Ed) in Shawnee County, also has more information online to help consumers cut grocery costs.

FOR PRINT PUBLICATIONS: Links used in this story
Bureau of Labor Statistics (consumer price index summary),
https://www.bls.gov/news.release/cpi.nr0.htm
Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program, www.shawnee.k-state.edu/efnep
Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Education Program, www.shawnee.k-state.edu/snap-ed

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Simple Ways to Cut Your Grocery Bill (K-State Research and Extension, Shawnee County),
https://www.shawnee.k-state.edu/health-home-safety

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