



Making the Switch!

Moving from a Fat-Filled, Sugar-Laden Stupor to a Leaner, Healthy Lifestyle.

Advice for eating healthy food and living a healthy lifestyle is everywhere. The evening news blares out every new medical suspicion that may or may not affect our health. Best selling books promise us miracle cures if we will only follow their special "foolproof plan". TV exercise gurus offer us medieval torture devices supposedly designed to trim an aging physique. Modern medicine men urge us to buy their dietary supplements that are, "Guaranteed or your money back!" So much of the information contradicts itself that none of it seems trustworthy and all of it becomes annoying. The information that does seem reliable is targeted at people who apparently have wads of money to spend on specialty foods, supplements and exercise classes. That's all well and good for them, but what are the rest of us supposed to do? More specifically, what am I supposed to do?

I can't afford to jump on every bandwagon that comes down the road. Emotionally, I'm not willing to follow every pied piper of health that offers to heal me of disease and give me the body of an 18-year-old swimsuit model. My health goals are a little closer to home and reality. I want to feed my family tasty, nutritious meals that they are actually willing to eat. I want to prevent cancer, diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease. I want enough energy to chase my kids, vacuum the ceilings every now and then, and make the beds every morning. I have to be able to do all of this on a tight budget. The most I have to spend for a week's worth of groceries is \$100. Often I have somewhat less than that. For the time being this amount is set in stone so whatever goals I intend to reach must fit within my limitations.

"Healthy" can mean a lot of different things to a lot of different people. Finding trustworthy sources of information is challenging to say the least. In desperation I have read everything on the topic I can find. I've scoured the library and the Internet and come up with a mountain of information. Unfortunately, fad diets, health extremists and outright charlatans seem to make up the bulk of available information. Luckily, there are a few conservative sources like the American Dietetic Association, American Heart Association and the government's Dietary Guidelines. They may not be perfect, but they seem less likely to sell me a bill of goods than some of the more esoteric resources.

Sifting and sorting through this information has been challenging, but I'm determined, and determination is free. Through all it I've noticed that like cream, certain suggestions have risen to the top of the heap. By taking note of these common recommendations, I've been able to discern fact from fiction and set realistic, achievable goals for myself and my family. A brief description of them may be found below:

- Keep total daily fat consumption below 30 to 35% of our daily calories. Saturated & trans fat combined should be kept below 10%.
- Keep cholesterol below 300mg per day.
- Prepare and eat more whole grains.
- Eat at least 5 fruits and veggies a day; more is better.
- Increase fiber to 30g per day or more.
- Keep sodium under 2500mg a day.
- Reduce sugar intake and avoid overindulgence. Some sources recommend less than 10 teaspoons per day, per person.
- Exercise everyday, as a family if possible, individually if not.

I made a list of these goals that I could hang up in the kitchen. This keeps them in the forefront of my mind as I develop methods to reach them.

Remember; throughout this process cost is a MAJOR factor for me. All the dietary changes I make must be affordable and taste good to my kids. I'm not willing to waste my time or my food dollar with dishes that they refuse to eat. With all of these needs to meet, my order is a tall one. I have advantages though. Ingenuity, flexibility and a willingness to cook from scratch can go a long way towards achieving these goals. In the following paragraphs you'll find a list detailing some of the ways I've been able to accomplish this. They won't all fit your lifestyle, but they can be a springboard that helps you set and achieve your own dietary goals, custom designed for your nutritional needs and those of your family.

To reduce saturated fat, total fat & cholesterol:

- Switch from ground beef to ground turkey.
- Buy & cook less red meat.
- Use reduced-fat cheeses.
- Use more egg whites and egg-substitutes and fewer egg yolks.
- Use instant nonfat dry milk for both cooking and drinking.
- Make my own nonfat yogurt.
- Make peace with the butter verses margarine controversy.
- Choose healthier vegetable oils and use less fat in general.

→ Choose reduced-fat products when possible.

To meet the other goals:

- Replace processed grains with whole grains.
- Serve at least 5 fruits and vegetables a day.
- Choose reduced-sodium products and adjust recipes to use less salt.
- Use less sugar during food preparation and offer snacks that are low in sugar.
- Treat family time as an opportunity to exercise together.

Switch from ground beef to ground turkey. Since Mad Cow Disease hit the US in 2004, the price of beef has sky-rocketed. In my area most ground beef costs at least \$2 to \$3 a pound, or double what it did a year ago. The lean ground beef that dietitians insist we buy costs upwards of \$4 to \$5 a pound. Yikes! There is no way I can afford that on my budget. For years I've heard that ground turkey is the perfect alternative to ground beef. It's lower in saturated fat, cholesterol and total fat. I resisted ground turkey for a decade because it seemed like a "new-age-diet-food" to me. My red-blooded American husband had trouble getting around the idea that turkey is a holiday food. Between the two of us, we had never given it much of a chance. It took the rising cost of beef and the lurking fear of Mad Cow Disease for us to take a second look at our food prejudices. It turns out that ground turkey is a blessing that we had been overlooking for years.

At my local superstore I'm able to buy ground turkey for \$1.06 a pound in frozen "bullet" packs. Wow! This is half to a third of the current price for ground beef! Ground turkey saves me money plus it's healthier. My husband and I agree, that's a win-win situation for the whole family.

Of all the changes I made, this one was the most convenient. Turkey has a mild flavor and it replaces ground beef in any recipe with absolute perfection. When I began using ground turkey for our regular meals, I made a lot of spicy ethnic dishes. With the flavor of the meat secondary to the flavor of the finished dish, the family was able to develop a taste for turkey over time. Gradually I served fewer spicy dishes so the flavor of the meat could shine through.

As the kids questioned me about it I simply told them the truth. Beef prices are rising so fast and so high that our old stand-by, hamburger, is simply outside of our budget. Turkey is much less expensive and better for us too. There's little arguing with the facts, and the differences in flavor and texture are minor, so they have been mostly supportive of this change. Having my husband on my side helped a whole lot too.

If you or your family feels resistant to the idea of ground turkey, then let me offer some pointers. Start off small and with familiar, well-liked dishes. I do not recommend sneaking or making any changes without the family's knowledge. I don't think you have to broadcast what you're up to either. If spaghetti is a family favorite then prepare your regular recipe only use ground turkey instead of ground beef. You may want to add a bit of extra basil or garlic to make the flavor of the turkey less noticeable. After the family tells you how yummy dinner was, you can casually mention that turkey was on sale and that you are trying to use it more often since beef is so expensive these days. You might even mention Mad Cow Disease or emphasize the health benefits if the opportunity presents itself. Then close your mouth. Don't mention it again unless someone else

brings up the subject. If they ask what type of meat is in a dish, always tell them the truth. If they object, then keep trying, just at a slower pace.

In case your family refuses to try ground turkey, don't give up. There are some alternatives. You can combine half ground turkey and half ground beef and still save money. Or you can use the cheapest form of ground beef but drain and rinse it to remove most of the fat and cholesterol. It will cost more than ground turkey and won't have quite the same health benefits but it is a reasonable compromise under certain circumstances.

Buy and cook less red meat. Replace beef, pork and lamb with chicken, turkey, fish and more vegetarian meals. This is a lot easier than it seems. It turns out that all of my family's favorite fatty meats are available in reduced-fat versions, many of which cost less than the meats I had been buying. Turkey ham replaces ham made from pigs. It's much cheaper than pork ham, plus it's lower in fat and cholesterol. The flavor is almost exactly the same as pork ham. Turkey ham cold cuts make delicious sandwiches, while larger 2 to 3 pound turkey hams can be baked or roasted and served just like pork hams. I prefer roasted turkey ham to be glazed with brown sugar and served with pineapple on the side. My husband prefers his with honey mustard. Any pork ham recipe you have can be used on a turkey ham and I doubt the family will even know the difference.

Turkey sausage is the best alternative to pork sausage. It has half the fat, goes for half the price and has all of the flavor. I buy it in frozen pound-sized "bullets" at my local superstore. It is in the same spot as frozen ground turkey and costs the same too, \$1.06 per pound. It must be thawed before it can be used, but the price and the taste make it well worth a little thawing time. I wish I could find turkey sausage in links, but apparently they are not available in my area. Instead I make due by shaping my turkey sausage into links or patties myself. Sometimes I fry the links and patties until they are done, and store them in the fridge or freezer until needed. This way the kids or I can briefly reheat the sausages instead of cooking them from scratch every morning. Pre-frying is a little bit of work. My hands get goeey, and I have to be sure to wash everything with bleach water when I'm done. The time savings are great though, and I love being able to see the kids prepare their own breakfast.

Raw turkey bacon costs a little less per pound than raw pork bacon. Once it's cooked though, the real value shows through. Pork bacon melts away into bacon grease and gristle, leaving only a tiny bit of lean meat. With turkey bacon on the other hand, very little is lost in cooking resulting in significantly more cooked meat for your food dollar. I've found it tastes best if sizzled in a teaspoon of vegetable oil. If fat is a significant factor for you, it can be cooked in non-stick spray instead.

Chicken baloney and chicken hot dogs are the least expensive lunch meats I've found, and somewhat healthier than their bovine and porcine cousins. I tend to buy them every week and the family eats them for snacks, quick lunches and sometimes we put them on pizzas. They have become staples and while they may not be the healthiest thing my kids eat, they are better than a lot of the alternatives.

If roasts are a family favorite, then give turkey breasts a try. They cost fully half of what a chuck roast does and make our arterial walls a lot happier too. Turkey breasts roast up

to golden perfection and can be seasoned in any way that you normally season a beef roast. My favorite way is with dry onion soup mix. The family raves about roasted turkey breasts and they are just as easy on the cook as beef roasts.

Chicken leg-quarters are the biggest value in the meat case. They shake and bake just as easily as pork chops and they cost about 1/10 as much. Plus chicken leg-quarters are far more versatile. If you need boneless cutlets, chicken thighs are easy to bone, cost less than pork cutlets or platinum priced chicken breasts, and stir-fry just as nicely. The only problem with chicken leg-quarters is that they have to be repackaged and frozen when you get home from the store. With a little practice you'll learn that this can be done in less than 5 minutes, and you'll still benefit from the health and savings that chicken leg-quarters offer.

After looking over these alternatives it dawned on me that I am essentially giving up red meat. While this wasn't my original intention I console myself with the knowledge that I'm saving money and preserving the family's good health. Eliminating all red meat wasn't my goal. Reducing it by finding alternatives is. This may not be the best choice for every family, but it gives you some ideas to consider.

Use reduced fat cheese. Fewer reduced fat cheeses are available these days than were a decade ago. In many ways this is good because all of the icky tasting ones have been purged from the market. After recently tasting a few of the 2% and reduced fat cheeses available, I was surprisingly pleased with the quality. All of the 2% cheeses I've tasted are excellent. Not a single one has disappointed me. Among the reduced-fat cheeses a little more discretion is necessary.

Our least difficult switch in the cheese department was from regular cheddar to Cabot Reduced Fat Cheddar. At my local superstore the unit price for both is the same, and Cabot's flavor is magnificent so the family never even questioned me about this change. They honestly couldn't tell the difference. Some other easy changes for us have been using low fat cottage cheese instead of full fat cottage cheese; Neufchatel instead of cream cheese; and 2% American sandwich slices instead of standard American Cheese. All of these products are available in store brands so the prices haven't changed and my budget hasn't been affected.

Two other cheeses I've tried are reduced fat Swiss cheese slices and a shredded Mexican blend made up mostly of Monterey Jack. The prices for these are slightly higher, but not overwhelmingly so. The flavor is not as good as I would have liked, especially when cold from the fridge. However both improve significantly when served at room temperature or melted. After a bit of consideration I feel they can add occasional variety to our diet.

My final cheese decision is to consciously use more part-skim mozzarella. The brand I have been buying all along turns out to be low in fat and quite delicious. Plus it's cheap, versatile and the family already enjoys it.

Use more egg whites and egg-substitutes and fewer egg yolks. If you aren't worried about cholesterol then you can eat 7 to 10 whole eggs a week and still be fine. If you are worried about cholesterol then like me, you must limit your egg yolks to 4 per week. This goal is hard for me to reach. I like eggs, a lot. So I've been trying to teach

myself to use egg whites and egg substitutes instead of whole eggs. In baking 2 egg whites can replace each whole egg called for in a recipe. This works quite well in quick breads like muffins, tea breads and pancakes. It also does well with cakes and cookies. For certain things like quiche and custards, a small amount of egg yolk improves the flavor and texture of the finished product. A common practice is to use 6 egg whites and 1 whole egg for every 4 eggs called for in these types of recipes.

When I do use whole eggs I prefer the medium size. Since they are smaller, they contribute a little less cholesterol than larger eggs do. Additionally, they are much cheaper in my area, sometimes almost half as much as their larger relatives. Another option is to use eggs that are high in Omega 3 fatty acids. There are several brands available these days, the most widely known is Egg-Land's Best. If you are watching every penny and still need special eggs, you can buy eggs high in Omega 3 whenever you need the whole egg and regular eggs when you will be discarding the yolks and only using the whites.

On the subject of egg whites, they are cheapest when you separate them yourself and toss the yolks down the sink or in the garbage or share them with a lurking pet who might be interested in a little treat. Egg-substitutes are made from egg whites with a small touch of yellow coloring. They make yummy scrambled eggs, better than egg whites alone. For baking, your own egg whites are a better use of funds.

Use instant nonfat dry milk for all drinking and cooking and make my own yogurt. Nonfat dry milk is easily the biggest bargain in the dairy department. It is fat free, extremely low in cholesterol, high in Calcium and Vitamin D, and costs fully half as much as fresh milk. It's convenient to keep on hand, convenient to prepare, and tastes much better than it used to. If you are already accustomed to skim milk, then reconstituted dry milk is an easy switch to make. My family does not object to the flavor at all. On the contrary, they think it tastes good and when they have to drink whole milk at friend's houses they come home and complain how icky it is.

My husband and eldest son are both moderately lactose intolerant. We've found that reconstituted milk doesn't bother either of them the way that fresh milk does. Reconstituted milk is better for my budget, healthier for my body and easier on my family's digestive tract than fresh milk. Why would I use anything else?

One of my favorite ways to use dry milk is in making yogurt. It only takes a few minutes to prepare and adds a broader dimension to our daily diet. Over the past year I have lazily gotten out of the habit of preparing yogurt at home. After seeing the error of my ways I repented and resolved to make as much yogurt as the family eats, generally about 2 quarts a week. Prepared yogurt available in the fridge at all times has many benefits. First off, it's a quick and easy snack that the kids really enjoy. A dab of jam or jelly stirred into a bowlful tastes even better than yogurt cups from the store, plus the kids can make it themselves. Another good trick is to blend yogurt half and half with mayonnaise to make a reduced-fat dressing. It works great anywhere you would normally use mayonnaise. Plain yogurt makes a super substitute for sour cream in baking, cooking and dips. Plus it adds calcium to our diet and healthy bacteria to aid in our digestion.

Use margarine exclusively. The debate between margarine and butter has been a challenging one for me personally. Which is more harmful to our bodies, trans fat or saturated fat? Butter is much more expensive than margarine; does it have any health benefits that make it worth the higher price? Margarine is affordable, tastes pretty good and is cholesterol free; doesn't that make it the better choice? In my quest for answers I discovered that the American Heart Association, the National Heart, Lung & Blood Institute, the American Dietetic Association, and the Mayo Clinic all recommend margarine over butter as part of a healthy diet. Since it costs only a fraction of the price of butter, margarine is definitely the best choice for a challenged budget like mine. For those of us watching our trans fat intake there are several high quality margarines available that are completely free of trans fat. Promise and Smart Balance both make good products that are much more affordable than butter. If you are genuinely determined to reduce your food costs while improving your family's diet then I urge you to give margarine a try. The health and price advantages combine to make in an excellent choice.

Choose healthier vegetable oils and use less fat in general. Olive oil is supposed to be the best fat we can use. It's also one of the most expensive. I use it in small quantities, mostly when the flavor is important. I can't afford to use it day in and day out for all of my cooking needs. Instead I use Canola oil which is much cheaper and almost as good for us as olive oil. Canola is a combination of the words Canada & Oil. Canola oil used to be called rapeseed oil. This name made it hard to market, so it was given a new name to make it more acceptable to the general public.

Another good choice for everyday is soybean oil. It is the least expensive and one of the highest in poly-unsaturated fats, plus it has lots of yummy omega 3 fatty acids. If you are really watching your pennies then use soybean oil. If you have a few extra nickels to spend, then stick with Canola oil.

Corn oil tastes really good and costs about the same as Canola oil. I sometimes buy it for specific uses, but it really isn't necessary. Safflower and sunflower oils are also good choices, but once again, they cost a bit more. The truth of the matter is that most vegetable oils are pretty much interchangeable. The only exceptions are specialty oils used primarily for flavoring like dark sesame oil or walnut oil. In baking, salad dressings and frying almost any vegetable oil will get the job done. My practice is to buy Canola oil when I can afford it and switch to Soybean oil when I'm dead broke.

I still use small amounts of vegetable shortening in baking, especially for biscuits and homemade mixes. Standard shortenings contain small amounts of trans fat They are inexpensive though and used in small quantities. If you are trying to avoid all trans fat then use the new vegetable shortenings that are trans fat-free. Brand names with which I'm familiar are Spectrum, Smart Balance and a special version of Crisco. These special vegetable shortenings cost more than their hydrogenated counterparts, but not much more. Since they are used in small quantities they tend to last a long time, which makes them a reasonable purchase.

Using less fat in general has turned out to be easier than I thought it would be. I replaced the oil I used to add to pasta and rice to keep them from boiling over with a small squirt of non-stick spray. I keep my iron skillet well seasoned and fry in non-stick spray and a small amount of oil. Some people use non-stick skillet but they have never

been good buys for me so I avoid them. I bake, steam, roast, boil and broil more than I fry and I remove skin and visible fat and from chicken leg quarters before cooking them. In recipes I reduce the fat as much as possible. I have not and will not give up fat completely. Fat makes food taste good and keeps us full, both of which are reasonable qualities for us to expect from the food we eat. I'm just more careful now about the types and amounts of fat that I use in cooking and serve to the family.

Use reduced fat products when possible. This means that if I have a choice between a reduced-fat version and a full-fat version of the same product and they both cost the same amount of money, then I will choose the reduced fat version. For instance, my main grocery store offers their brand of mayonnaise in 2 versions. Both versions cost the same and they both taste pretty good. One version has 50 calories and 5g fat per tablespoon; the other has 100 calories and 12g fat per tablespoon. I used to buy the full fat version without thinking. Now I use the reduced fat version instead. It doesn't cost any extra, I just have to make the mental change in my mind and then make the physical change at the store when I pick up a jar and place it in my cart.

I have also begun buying a few fat-free salad dressings. My local dollar store has 3 varieties and they all cost \$1 a pint. The fat-free Italian tastes the best. Fat-free Ranch and Thousand Island both benefit from a little doctoring up at home to make them taste better. I blend homemade yogurt and a small spoonful of vegetable oil with either dressing to improve the flavor. It also extends the dressing and reduces the sodium content. The boys love Ranch dressing as a dip for fresh vegetables, so it encourages them to get their 5 a day.

Some products can be made inexpensively at home with less fat and/or sugar than their store-bought counterparts. Yogurt is the first item that comes to mind, but there are many others too. Salad dressings, sandwich spreads, rice mixes and frozen entrees can all save money, fat, sodium and sugar when they are prepared at home.

So far the changes we've made have dealt mostly with fat and cholesterol. Some changes were more difficult for us to make than others. Most have saved money, while one or two cost a little bit more. The savings we pocketed have more than made up for the extra costs meaning that in the long run these healthy changes have saved more money than they've cost.

The next issues to be addressed are whole grains, sodium, fruits and vegetables and sugar.

Replace processed grains with whole grains. I have always loved whole grains so I am glad to have a good excuse to use more of them. It used to be that when times were tough I would avoid whole grains because most of them cost about twice as much as their processed counterparts. For instance, whole wheat flour is \$2 for 5-pounds while all-purpose white flour is \$1 for 5-pounds. Brown rice, whole wheat pasta, whole grain rye flour and whole cornmeal are all roughly twice as much as their denuded cousins. I always knew whole grains tasted better and were better for us, but I had trouble justifying them because they cost more.

As I thought about it I came to some realizations. Even though whole grains cost more than processed grains, they are still one of the least expensive items available at the market. For instance, \$5 can buy a dozen snack cakes, or 5lbs of whole wheat flour, 2lbs of whole cornmeal and a big tub of rolled oats. Obviously the snack cakes are a waste of money, while the whole grains add nutrition and variety to our diet. Since I'm saving money in other areas of my food budget, I've decided to make as much room for whole grains as I can.

When weighing the extra cost of whole grains remember that most double or triple in volume when cooked, so a pound of dry brown rice becomes 2 to 3 pounds of cooked rice. I've found this makes it easier for me to toss a package of brown rice or whole wheat spaghetti into the cart.

One method I've been using to increase our whole grain consumption is to use a blend of half-white flour and half-whole wheat flour for all of my bread baking. When possible I use all whole-wheat flour, especially in quick breads. For yeast breads though the family prefers the lighter flavor of half wheat and half white. We eat a lot of bread so this blend keeps the cost down, pleases the family and gives us all more fiber in our daily diet.

As for the other grains, whole grain cornmeal replaces processed cornmeal. Cornbread and cornmeal mush turn out the same with either version and whole cornmeal tastes so much better.

Whole-wheat pasta replaces pasta made with white flour. They cook in the same amount of time and the texture of whole wheat pasta is good. At first my kids had a little trouble adjusting to whole wheat pasta so I stopped serving it for about a month. Then I made a nice big pot of spaghetti and they didn't complain a bit. They were just happy to have pasta back on the table again.

Brown rice replaces long-grain white rice measure for measure. Brown rice cooks in 45 minutes while white rice cooks in 20 minutes. It takes a bit of practice to adjust to the time difference, but once you get used to it you'll find there is no extra trouble involved. The flavor of brown rice is almost the same as long-grain white rice. My kids noticed the rice was a little more chewy, but they actually preferred the texture.

Some people have no extra time for brown rice or are uncomfortable with the texture. In this case converted or parboiled rice is the next best alternative. Converted rice has much of the nutritional benefit of brown rice but it cooks in 20 minutes just like white rice. Brown rice has a bit more fiber than converted rice, but otherwise their nutritional makeup is quite similar. Converted rice costs more than plain white rice but it is less than brown rice. For the most savings shop around for an inexpensive store-brand version. If time is of the essence, then converted rice may be the right choice for you and your family.

Quick or old-fashioned oats, pearled barley, Toasty-O's, Puffed Brown Rice and Puffed Whole Wheat cereal are already a part of our regular diet. They are all whole grains so I didn't make any changes to them besides trying to use them more often. I am also making a more concerted effort to use wheat germ, wheat bran and oat bran in my baking. They are relatively inexpensive and add healthy variety to our daily fare.

Items I decided not to change include saltine crackers, graham crackers, farina hot cereal (Cream of Wheat), grits and cornflakes. These 5 items are quite inexpensive and don't make up the bulk of our diet. If I could find a reasonably priced source of store-brand, Triscuit-like crackers I would use them instead of saltines, but so far I haven't found any. Instead I use a store-brand version of Saltines with unsalted tops. Graham crackers used to be made with graham, or whole wheat flour, but now most are made from white flour that has been colored to look like whole wheat flour. Even still, they make a good snack especially for growing children and are inexpensive at Dollar Stores. I like Farina for breakfast plus it's flavor and texture are very comforting early in the morning. Bulgur wheat, cracked wheat and Wheateena cereal are reasonable replacements for farina if I ever decide to give it up. Grits are a Southern favorite and I know the whole family would rebel if I took them away, so I haven't even considered it. Whole Grain Yellow Grits are available in some locations, and they taste the same as white grits. They cost about 4 times as much though, so I don't use them as often as I would if they were cheaper. Cornflakes could be omitted from my grocery list completely because they don't offer much in the way of nutrition. They are nice for breading chicken and in some desserts. Besides, at \$1 a pound they are so cheap that I feel their presence is justified.

One thing I do to lower the costs of whole grains is to buy whole grain wheat in large sacks and grind it myself. This makes whole wheat flour at least as cheap as white flour and probably even cheaper. I have an electric grain mill that I received as a birthday present a few years ago. It grinds any type of grain into flour or meal and has more than paid for itself over the years. If you are unable to do this sort of thing, don't worry, no one expects you to. I only mention it to offer an alternative to those who are interested.

Make certain we get at least 5 servings of fruits and vegetables a day, preferably more. With a little forethought, it's almost easy to make sure we get enough fruits and vegetables. I begin by serving fruit or juice with breakfast every morning. Lunch always includes a vegetable, usually two. It can be sprouts and tomato on a sandwich, carrots and celery served with a dip or vegetables in a soup or casserole. During the summer months a simple chef salad is easy to prepare and refreshing to eat too. I try to serve fruit with lunch everyday. Oranges, apples and bananas are almost always cheap and fresh fruit in season gives us an ever-changing variety. Fruit canned without added sugar makes a nice and inexpensive change of pace, especially in the wintertime. Canned unsweetened applesauce, peaches, pears, pineapple and mixed fruit are always available inexpensively. Fruit desserts including apple cobbler, peach crisp, and strawberry shortcake are delicious and nutritious. Dried fruits like raisins, prunes and apricots make inexpensive, healthy snacks.

Serving potatoes at dinner is another easy way to get an extra vegetable into our daily diet. When we have potatoes at dinner, I still try to serve at least one other vegetable, and often a salad or fresh vegetables and dip too. We prefer vegetables plainly seasoned and undercooked. A pinch of salt, pepper, sugar and a small pat of margarine will dress any cooked vegetable with perfect simplicity.

When I made a point to add more vegetables to our diet I looked over the produce department to discover which vegetables are routinely inexpensive so I could make better

use of them. I already knew that cabbage, carrots, celery, onions, garlic and potatoes are affordable, versatile, and keep well in the fridge. In addition, my search for bargains turned up fresh cucumbers, green peppers, radishes, parsley and iceberg lettuce. I added these to the list of fresh vegetables that I'm trying to serve more often.

Fresh bags of salad are expensive compared to plain lettuce. They save time when you're in a rush but they tend to go bad quickly and even though they claim not to have preservatives added to them, they still taste a bit "funny" to me. Fresh heads of iceberg lettuce will keep in a plastic bowl called a lettuce-keeper for almost a full month in the fridge. If you don't have one and you are tired of your lettuce going bad then look for one at your local discount store. They may cost \$5 but will pay for themselves in only a few weeks. This allows you to serve salads according to your plan and not according to the whim of the decaying bag of lettuce frowning at you from the depths of an unfriendly refrigerator.

Variety lettuce can be rinsed and stored in a sealed plastic bag along with a paper towel. If kept cool the lettuce will keep for well over a week this way.

When tomatoes are plentiful in the garden or cheap at roadside stands we eat them like they're going out of style. The rest of the year we mostly make due with the canned variety. Out of season tomatoes don't taste good and usually cost too much for my budget.

Frozen vegetables packed loosely in large bags are another great veggie bargain. They are easy to find, easy to use, low in sodium, and don't have any waste. They save time too because they are already picked, washed and cut. Just heat and eat.

Fiber takes care of itself now that we're eating more whole grains, fruits and vegetables. I don't actively try to add more to our diet. If I were worried about it I would add wheat bran and oat bran to all of our baked goods and make sure I didn't peel fruits and vegetables before serving them.

Choose reduced sodium products and adjust recipes to use less salt. At first I was worried that reducing salt would make meals bland, but I quickly put this notion to rest. I still use salt, I just don't use as much as I have in times past. I think it had become a crutch for me. When I didn't know how to season a dish I would add plenty of salt and pepper and then I didn't have to worry about how it would taste. Salt and pepper are the great equalizers of the seasoning kingdom; everything doused liberally with both will taste the same.

Determined to meet our health goals successfully, I came up with the following changes to reduce the sodium in our diet. Each of these changes is small, but combined together they make a big impact.

- ➔ Switch to low sodium broth packets instead of high sodium bouillon cubes. These cost a little more than standard bouillon cubes, but the savings in sodium makes the extra cost worthwhile.
- ➔ Better yet, use homemade chicken broth with no added salt. Chicken fat, skin, bones and backs are all boiled together for a couple of hours to make homemade broth. Then the solids are drained out and the broth is chilled overnight. All of

the fat will rise to the top and can be discarded. The remaining broth is nearly fat free and tastes out of this world! Small amounts of salt can be added for flavor as needed.

- Buy saltine crackers with unsalted tops. These are available to me in a store-brand so they don't cost any more than the regular variety.
- Use canned vegetables with no added salt, especially canned tomato products. I can buy these in a store brand too, quite inexpensively. They are so cheap actually, that they are a big staple in my kitchen.
- Cook dried beans from scratch and don't add any salt. It's cheaper and healthier.
- When I must use canned beans I drain and rinse them to cut the sodium by 40%.
- Prepare homemade salad dressings and soups to save cash and reduce sodium. Commercially available products are swimming in salt. Homemade tastes better and costs less too.
- Add less salt to recipes. Use herbs, spices, lemon juice and other seasonings to liven up the flavor.

By using less salt on a regular basis we have adjusted our taste buds. Now we actually prefer our foods less salty. When we go back to the old levels they seem overly salty and we wonder what we were thinking back then. After getting used to the flavor of food we find the flavor of salt to be distracting.

A product I've just started using is produced by Morton and called "Lite Salt". It is a blend of salt and potassium chloride. To my family it tastes exactly like regular salt. The advantage is that it has less than half the sodium of regular salt, but with all of the flavor. Like so many light items, "lite salt" costs a bit more than regular salt. At my market I can buy three 11oz containers for \$1, so in my book it is still a bargain. The recipes on this site are tested with regular salt, but if you choose to use lite salt instead simply replace the regular salt with an equal amount of lite salt. My bet is that no one will notice any difference.

Reduce sugar to 10 teaspoons per person per day, or less. Arrrrrgggghhhh. This one is tough on me. I'm a sugar addict. I admit it. I am married to a sugar addict who is diabetic and I have raised children who are sugar addicts too. I've heard it said that many Baptists have a sweet tooth, so maybe it's a cultural thing. Of all the changes I've made to my family's diet, this one has been the most difficult for me personally. With that said, I am also the most proud of my collection of desserts. I have cooked and tested, altered and retested and worked with the best of my skills to come up with some very good examples of delicious desserts that are also reduced in both sugar and fat. My desserts are not fat-free and they are not sugar-free. I've chosen not to use artificial sweeteners because they are expensive and because we have no idea how the use of these sweeteners will affect us down the road. Instead I've used good old-fashioned white sugar, brown sugar, powdered sugar, honey and molasses. Better the enemy you know, as they say.

Our budget is so lean that desserts are one of the treats we've given ourselves so that we don't feel deprived. If we gave up desserts completely, we'd be tempted to bust the grocery budget with other types of goodies, which would cost more and probably not be as healthy as sensible homemade desserts. Besides, baking is something I've always liked

most about cooking and I'm not about to give it up. Instead I've taken my time to create and discover dessert recipes that satisfy my sweet tooth without filling out my waistline.

Exercise is the last item on the list. It's a tough one for most of us. Over the years I've found a few ways to make it easier. I walk almost every morning. When the boys went to public school I would walk after putting the boys on the bus. Now that we homeschool I've found a new alternative. After breakfast, but before school, we put the leashes on the dogs and drive to a nearby track. We walk the dogs for about 20 to 30 minutes. This little outing makes it much easier to make the transition to "learning time" when we return home. During the Summer months I try to walk early, before the day turns hot, or late in the evening when it's cooling down. If it rains or snows I head over to the mall and walk inside with the other mall-walkers. Some days I only manage a mile and other days I challenge myself to 3 or 4 miles. I don't walk every single day but I try to make it happen more often than not.

As for other types of exercise, the boys ride their bikes, climb trees, explore the woods and play outside as often as possible. They also participate in Karate classes several days a week and are well on their way to earning their black belts. This has the boys and I covered.

My husband does not exercise regularly. He works hard for his family and doesn't have a lot of time, much less motivation to participate in a regular exercise program. I can't change this. Nagging won't help; it will hurt the situation. What I can do is invite him to go with me, even if he always says no, and I can keep inviting him, every time. I can pray that God will lead him to do what is best for his own body. I can also pray that I have the patience and faith necessary to let them take care of it together, without my intervention. It's between my husband and God and is no business of mine whatsoever. On the rare occasion that I feel tempted to nag him about exercise I have come to realize that it is a reflection of my own need to exercise more. I take care of my need to stay active and I accept that each of us must come to exercise in our own way and our time. This philosophy keeps the peace in the family and makes me responsible for my own behavior instead of anyone else's.

These changes are taking time to get used to. They didn't happen overnight and they didn't happen painlessly. Some of the changes made the family question my motivations and me. When they think I'm up to something sneaky it's my job to teach them otherwise.

I've consciously paved this road for them, making it as easy and familiar as I can. I've stayed within my budget, but it's taken dedication and time on my part to make this possible. If I didn't have the time to spend cooking that I currently do, I wouldn't be able to stay within my budget. Baking bread, making chicken broth, homemade soups and preparing most meals from scratch takes an investment of my time, energy and brain power. The health of my family is worth it. If I worked all day I wouldn't have the time to give to cooking that I do now. I assume I would have extra money though, and simple foods that I make now could be replaced with low-cost factory made alternatives. Store-bought whole grain bread, reduced sodium soups and broths, packaged baked goods and pre-cut vegetables are all available to people who are pressed for time but still want to eat a healthy diet.

Looking back on the way we used to eat and comparing it to the way we eat now, I notice a few things in hindsight. The way I used to cook tasted good and made use of low-cost foods. I admit that I added a lot of needless fat and sodium to our diet, simply through habit. My grandmother did it that way. When I was little my mom did it that way, and no one ever taught me that there were other options.

As an adult with my own family I realize that I do have choices. I can choose to buy reduced-fat mayonnaise or full-fat mayonnaise. The tuna salad gets prepared and eaten either way. I can choose to fry my chicken in 1/2-cup of oil or in 1-tablespoon of oil. The chicken turns out yummy either way. I think that before I didn't understand how I could cook the chicken in a little bit of oil and still have it turn out good. I was worried that if I changed the family's diet that it would hurt them. I thought I was betraying them by making them give up the foods they loved. Now I see that we don't have to give up anything. Actually we receive a lot more than we lose. We receive energy and nutrition from the foods we eat instead of sloth and gluttony. We put food in the proper place it should occupy in our lives, allowing it to nourish our bodies without becoming an unhealthy indulgence. I have had to make some serious shifts in my thinking process to bring me around to this understanding. I am eternally thankful that I have, even though there have been challenges along the way. I'm not ashamed of the way I feed my family. I know I'm doing what's best for them and in all honesty, I am sort of surprised at how easy it's been. It began with me fumbling about in the dark, but it's become a permanent source of enlightenment.

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