The Rhoads’ SNAP Challenge

Vickie Rhoads decided to do the SNAP challenge with her family and share their experience to call attention the fact that nearly 13% of Iowans are food insecure, meaning they do not have the ability to acquire nutritionally adequate and safe foods in socially acceptable ways. Vickie shared, “We have had friends and family whose income has been reduced due to job layoffs or family deaths.” A one-week challenge certainly does not replicate the complexities of poverty, but it is one way to better-understand the reality many Iowans face.

Paul Rhoads may be the coach at Jack Trice Stadium, but Vickie is in charge at home juggling all of the family’s needs and three very busy schedules. The Rhoads have two sons, one of whom lives at home and the other is at college. Vickie began her challenge by going grocery shopping with her teenage son, Wyatt. He is a high school wrestler and must be careful about his diet, in fact he was preparing for the state wrestling tournament during the challenge.

Vickie’s reflections on this experience included several meaningful realizations:

- “It’s amazing how much you think about food when it is limited.” This is a quote from Vickie’s reflection log on day 1 of the challenge. This thought points to the importance of food beyond nourishment. We all have routines and habits built around food and when those are disrupted it is uncomfortable.

- Vickie and Wyatt began by purchasing the foods Wyatt is used to eating to ensure that he would get what he needed for wrestling. Reflecting on the experience, Vickie mentioned, “I didn’t plan for myself very well”. This is a common reality for families working with a tight grocery budget. Children are often prioritized meaning Mom and Dad make some additional compromises.

- Vickie shopped carefully and did a fair bit of scratch cooking to get the most nutrition for her dollar. She cooked a larger amount of food several times so that she would have leftovers for future meals. The only food they really missed was fresh fruit and vegetables. The budget did not allow for the fresh produce they are accustomed to.

On the last day of the challenge, Vickie reflected back on the week, “It took a lot more planning on my end”. She also shared that she will do some things differently going forward. First, Wyatt enjoyed the grocery shopping and it was a good learning experience for him. She plans to include him in shopping more often. Second, the experience helped her identify how she could minimize food waste at home by making better use of perishable foods. Third, she has learned about various resources available to families struggling to eat healthy on a budget. “I hadn’t really thought about the programs that are available in Ames for people who need help.” Iowa Food Assistance (http://www.dhs.state.ia.us/consumers/assistance_programs/foodassistance/index.html) and WIC (https://www.idph.state.ia.us/wic/) provide benefits to families who meet income qualifications. In addition, local food banks and pantries provide food to needy families. To learn how to receive help from a food pantry or make a donation, visit the Iowa Food Bank Association’s website (http://iowafba.org/). For families trying to eat healthy on a tight budget, ISU Extension

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and Outreach offers programs to help you build your nutrition knowledge as well as shopping and cooking skills. Visit our program website (http://www.extension.iastate.edu/humansciences/nutrition-education) for more information.

In this three-part blog series we have looked at the knowledge and skills necessary to eat healthy on a budget. We have discussed planning and strategy as well as the social and psychological role food has in our lives. If you are interested in these themes and hunger-related issues, you can visit the Feeding America website (http://feedingamerica.org/get-involved/hunger-action-month/snap-challenge.aspx) to learn more. Thank you to the Rhoads and Litchfields who shared their stories with us this month!

Christine Hradek—State Nutrition Specialist

Are Steamer Bags Worth the Money?

I’m all for increasing the amount of vegetables in the diet. Vegetables provide nutrients we can’t get from other foods plus they are low in calories and high in fiber. I also think frozen vegetables are a great value. They are usually flash frozen right after they are picked so they may have more nutrients than fresh vegetables that have spent a long time traveling across the country. Sometimes they are less expensive than fresh vegetables, and they are already cleaned and prepared.

A few years ago manufacturers began selling frozen vegetables that can be microwaved in the bag they are sold in. Microwave steam bag vegetables are supposed to be a healthy solution for those who want to increase their vegetable intake without sacrificing convenience. These “steamers” have gotten so popular that it is hard to find frozen bags of vegetables that are not “steamers”.

I just don’t get why these are so popular!

1) They are more expensive. An ounce of frozen mixed vegetables in the steamer bags in central Iowa cost between $.10 to $ .14 an ounce. While the same food in plain plastic bag cost $.08-.09 ounce. (Sometimes the bags cost the same, but the “steamer” bags had only ¾ as much as the plain bags).

2) I can’t see that they save much time or save washing dishes.
   a. The advantage of frozen bags of vegetables has always been that you could take out just what you need and put the rest back in the freezer. With “steamer” bags you have to cook the whole bag to get the steamer effect. I think this leads to wasted leftover vegetables. Unless you serve the vegetables in the plastic bag you still have to get a container dirty.
   b. I cook frozen vegetables without the aid of this specialized packaging. All it takes is a microwave safe serving bowl and some ordinary plastic wrap or a lidded microwave-safe container. I put about a cup of vegetables per person in the bowl, add about 1 tablespoon of water, cover and cook on high 2-5 minutes, depending on how much is in the bowl. If you’re unsure how much time is needed, start at two minutes. Keep cooking the vegetables for an additional one minute at a time until hot.

Before you jump on the steaming bag trend, make sure you compare the price per ounce and think about whether it will really save you time.

Peggy Martin—Registered Dietitian

Chocolate Surprise Cupcakes

Have you ever heard of a chocolate cupcake that provides 60% of the Vitamin A you needed in a day? Today is your lucky day!

My first experience with surprise cake was a layer cake made with spice cake mix and pumpkin pie spice. It tasted good. However, if it is not chocolate I usually don’t spend the calories on cake. We experimented a bit and came up with chocolate cupcakes made with pumpkin and apple juice. Believe it or not, there is no oil added at all.

I love this recipe because it is super simple, lower in calories than the usual cupcake, and more nutritious. I bought a pack of 6 juice boxes which I use just for this cake. It is super moist so I freeze what I am not going to use in the next 4 days.

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Chocolate Surprise Cupcakes
Serving Size: 1 cupcake | Serves: 24 | Cost Per Serving: $.12

Ingredients:
- 1 can (15 ounces) pumpkin
- 1 box (18 ounces) chocolate cake mix
- 3 eggs
- 3/4 cup (6 ounces) apple juice
- 1/2 cup chopped walnuts *

*the walnuts are optional, but they are included in the nutrition facts

Instructions:
1. Preheat oven to 350°F. Grease or spray muffin tins.
2. Combine the pumpkin, cake mix, eggs, and apple juice in a large mixing bowl.
4. Bake according to package directions for cupcakes (about 20 minutes).
5. Cupcakes are done when a toothpick inserted into a cupcake comes out clean.
6. Let cool on rack for 5-10 minutes. Remove from tin.

Options:
- You can use a white or spice cake mix with 1 tablespoon of cinnamon or pumpkin pie spice added to batter instead of the chocolate cake.
- 1/3 cup measure works well to scoop batter into muffin tin.
- Instead of cupcakes you can bake the cake in 9 x 13-inch cake pan or 10 x 15-inch jelly roll pan. Use toothpick method in Step #5 to test for doneness.
- Serve with low fat or fat free frozen whipped topping.

Peggy Martin—Registered Dietitian

SNAP Challenge Meals
Following our SNAP challenge blogs throughout the month of March, I received some requests for details about the foods I purchased and how I put them together into meals. I allowed myself $28 and I spent $25.01 so that I could use a few things from home (cooking spray, margarine, salt and pepper).

Breakfasts
Given the cost of meat, I tried to get protein from eggs each day. I made baked eggs twice during the week and ate one or two each morning with a slice of whole wheat toast with margarine, a banana and a cup of milk. My baked eggs recipe is quite simple.

Baked Eggs
1. Spray a muffin tin with non-stick spray or rub with a bit of vegetable oil.
2. Put a thin slice of ham in each cup and crack an egg inside the ham.
3. Bake at 375 degrees until eggs are totally set. This typically takes about 15 minutes.

Lunches
I went to work on five of the seven days of my challenge. I knew I would dwell on food a bit during this week so I wanted to choose lunches that would be very filling. Carrots and celery were the most affordable vegetables at my store, so I needed to

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base a lot of meals around them. At the beginning of the week I made a vegetable salad with garbanzo beans (aka chickpeas) that I ate for lunch with two or three clementines. I made all of the salad at once to get ready for the week. The full salad recipe was 4 cups of chopped carrots, 4 cups of chopped celery and two cans of garbanzo beans (drained and rinsed). Salad dressing did not fit in my budget so I topped my salad with about a tablespoon of reduced fat mayonnaise seasoned with salt and pepper when I sat down to eat each day.

On the weekend days when I was not at work, I ate leftovers from dinner.

**Dinners**

My twenty eight dollars did not give me room for a lot of variety during my week. There was much repetition. I chose two basic dishes and made them in large enough quantities to provide me with seven dinners plus a bit leftover. These dishes are not really recipes; they are just simple combinations that allowed me to eat relatively healthy for very little money.

The first was a meatless meal of whole wheat pasta with jarred pasta sauce topped with some grated cheddar cheese. This was not a particularly exciting dish, but I was able to get 4 single-serving meals for just $3.87.

The second dish was based around the fact that my store had a special on chicken thighs that made them the most affordable meat option for me. I bought a package of six thighs for $3.88. I built the dish around the chicken and stretched it with some additional ingredients.

**Chicken with Rice and Peppers**

1. Season chicken thighs with a bit of salt and pepper and roast at 425 degrees for 50 minutes or until a meat thermometer reads 165 on a food thermometer.
2. While chicken roasts, chop three bell peppers and cook them in a skillet over medium heat for about ten to twelve minutes.
3. When the peppers are cooked, add a can of pinto beans that have been drained and rinsed. I used a 24 ounce can. Season with pepper and a pinch of salt.
4. Cook brown rice according to package instructions. I made four servings, but this is flexible based on how many people you’re trying to serve.
5. When chicken is done. Remove the skin and pick meat from the bones.
6. Combine rice, peppers and beans, chicken and two cups of thawed frozen corn in a large pot. Cook over low heat until everything is combined and heated through.

This dish made six large servings and cost just under $10. It could easily serve eight if some sides were also being served.

As you can see, the volume of food available for my $28 budget was not too bad, but eating the same dish over and over again did get boring. I also ate less dairy and fruit than would be recommended. I also did not have room in my budget for any beverages beyond milk and water and I did not purchase any snacks.

My menus were largely built around the sales at my store, I chose proteins and vegetables that were at a good price and then filled them out with some whole grain products that are generally inexpensive. Since the challenge, I have continued to think this way when I determine meals for the week. My $28 budget allowed me to purchase most of the foods I needed for a week, but left no room for convenience items or snacks. This meant I spent a lot of time preparing my food and I chose only foods that gave me the nutrients I need.

Christine Hradek—State Nutrition Specialist