

Money saving food tips for ECEC menus

With the increasing cost of food, managing your ECEC menu budget may require some creative thinking and extra planning. There are some simple principles you can apply to your menu so that meals that are nourishing and balanced while not breaking your budget.

- **Choose seasonal fruits and vegetables.** They are usually better quality, tastier, and less expensive. Purchasing misshapen produce can also be a lot cheaper.
- **Frozen fruit and veg is a great alternative to fresh.** Frozen fruit and vegetables are often frozen as soon as they are picked when in season, retaining their nutrients and making them cheaper to buy in and out of season. Use both fresh and frozen veg on your menu. 
- **Buy in bulk.** If you have sufficient storage, buying non-perishable items or produce suitable for freezing in bulk can save money.
- **Consider your food suppliers.** You may have a local fruit and vegetable shop or butcher that offers cheaper and more varied produce than large supermarkets.
- **Check the price per kilo** rather than cost per packet to determine the cheapest price.
- **Grow your own herbs.** Fresh herbs are expensive, so if you are using these in your menu it can be much cheaper to grow your own. This also is a great activity for children to get involved in. Herbs such as rosemary, thyme, parsley and basil are good to start with. 
- **Plan your menu.** Menu planning is key for minimising food waste. Consider the preferences and dietary needs of children, choose meals that children will generally eat, and create standard recipes so you are only buying what you need.
- **Use up leftovers.** Plan the menu so that you can prepare meals that use up leftover fresh foods towards the end of your shopping week. Great meals for using up leftovers include shepherd's pie, casseroles, meatloaf, fruit crumbles, banana bread, and stewed fruit.
- **Add some legumes or lentils to wet dishes.** Legumes are a cheap way of providing similar nutrients to meat. You can use legumes to partially replace meat/poultry/fish in dishes such as spaghetti bolognese (lentils or kidney beans), curries (chickpeas), and casseroles. Dried red lentils are great option as they cook quickly. 
- **Cook from scratch when you can.** It is often cheaper to use less processed ingredients than a ready-made product. For example, using passata or a tin of tomatoes is usually cheaper than a bottle of pasta sauce.