

Sports Nutrition

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The Athlete's Kitchen

Athletes get hungry—and feeding hungry athletes can get quite expensive. I commonly hear comments such as: *My teenage athletes are eating me out of house and home.* • *Can I get enough protein without bars and powders that cost me \$110 a month?* • *When I'm too tired to cook, I spend way too much money on take-out meals.* Any way you look at it, athletes can easily over-spend their food budget. Here are practical suggestions to help you get more for your food dollar, so you can thrive on a budget-friendly, performance-enhancing sports diet.

- **Good nutrition starts in the supermarket.** Add *food shopping* to your schedule, so you'll at least have food in your fridge. Before shopping, make a rough menu for the week. Here's a 5-day [meal planning worksheet](#). Ideally, the plan will include foods on sale that week at the grocery store. For low-cost menu ideas, google *budget-friendly healthy meals*. You'll find lots of helpful websites, such as [BudgetBytes](#), [SpendSmartEatSmart](#), and [\\$5Dinners](#).

- **Don't overdo protein.** The easiest way to lower your food budget is to eat less meat/animal protein and more grains (pasta, rice, oats), beans, breads & other starches. While you need adequate protein (0.5 - 0.8 g protein/lb. body weight; 1.2-1.8 g/kg), filling up on excess protein displaces the carbs you need to optimally fuel your muscles. Including some protein-rich food at each meal and snack easily provides enough protein for the day. A small 4-oz (deck-of-cards size) serving chicken offers ~30 g protein. No need for costly protein bars, powders, supplements!

- **Budget breakfast suggestion:** *Eat more oatmeal!* It's much less expensive than cold cereal or eggs. Plus, oats have heart-healthy fiber that helps lower cholesterol. Oats are carb-rich; they do a good job of fueling muscles. They also offer 6 g protein/half-cup raw, to build/repair muscles. Buy the big 42-ounce cannister (~\$8 for Quaker; ~\$4.60 for the store brand). Skip the individual packets (\$0.50 each) and microwaveable tubs (\$1.80 each).

To easily make your [Oatmeal of Champions](#), put 1/2 to 1 cup of raw oats in a microwavable bowl, stir in 1 to 1.5 cups of milk (instead of water, for more protein and calcium), add some salt (enhances flavor) and microwave for 2-ish minutes. Swirl in a spoonful of peanut butter and some raisins. Voila, a yummy carb + protein meal that fuels you up for (or refuels you after) your morning workout. The oats + milk + pb offers about 20 grams of protein. That's the equivalent of protein in 3 eggs @ \$1.50.

- **Fruit on a budget:** Seasonal fresh fruit is a smart choice: strawberries in Spring; apples in Fall. Off season, canned and frozen fruits are just as nutritious—but with a lower price tag and no spoilage. A small box of blueberries can cost \$4 - \$6+, depending on the season. Frozen blueberries cost ~\$4 for a 12-ounce bag. Frozen berries (and fruits) are perfect for adding to oatmeal, smoothies, and yogurt. —Frozen fruit doesn't spoil. Peel then freeze that brown-speckled banana (and other produce) before it gets over-ripe and tossed out. Wasted food = Wasted money.

Sports Nutrition on a Budget

—Dried fruit also doesn't spoil and offers nutrients similar to fresh. Drying removes water and concentrates the nutrients. Choose dried fruits with differing colors—orange apricots and mango, yellow pineapple, brown dates—to boost your intake of anti-inflammatory, immune-boosting phytochemicals. Munch on a handful of dates or raisins, instead of snacking on ultra-processed and expensive energy bars (\$1.50-\$2.50+). Pair dried fruit with nuts for a handy carb-pro sports snack. Both can be bought in bulk for significant savings at BJ's and Costco.

- **Vegetables:** Frozen veggies, as compared to fresh, are a money-saving choice. Plus, they can be more nutritious. That's because they're flash-frozen at their peak of ripeness. Freezing retains nutrients that otherwise get lost when being transported from, let's say California to NYC. A 1-pound bag of store-brand frozen green beans costs less than \$2.00; fresh are twice that price. Frozen veggies are simple to cook. They require no prep-time, leave no waste—and won't spoil (like the head of broccoli you bought last week and never got around to cooking...).

- **Lunch:** A sports sandwich of champions is peanut butter + banana! For only \$1.40*, you can get 500 satiating calories that cost less than making a turkey-cheese wrap (\$3.85**) or buying a McDonald's Quarter-pounder (\$6.40)

*2 sl. Dave's Killer Bread (\$0.80) + 2 Tbsp Teddie Peanut butter (\$0.30) + medium banana (\$0.30) = \$1.40

**1 burrito-size flour tortilla (\$0.55) + 4 oz deli turkey (\$2.75) + 1 sl Swiss cheese (\$0.55) = \$3.85

—A grain-bowl for lunch can be budget-friendly: last night's leftover rice + canned beans + shredded cheese + salsa... less costly than buying lunch at Chipotle!

- **Snacks:** Single-serv sports snacks, such as applesauce pouches and yogurt cups, add up in terms of money as well as landfill space. Purchase reusable small containers that you fill yourself with yogurt, trail mix, or pretzels. Prep a week's worth of grab-n-go snacks, ready for you.

—Instead of granola bars, enjoy peanut butter + graham cracker *snack-wiches*. Crunchy and tasty—just like a granola bar, but costs less and is better for the environment!

Note: Peanut butter (much less expensive than other nut butters) is an anti-inflammatory, nutrient-rich source of protein that blends well into all meals, be it PB in oatmeal for breakfast, PB&J for lunch, PB+apple for snacks, and [peanutty pasta](#) for dinner.

- **Dinner:** Canned tuna and salmon are less expensive than fresh fish—and offer cook-free options for adding omega-3 fats into your diet. • Enjoy eggs for dinner (instead of breakfast). • If you are a die-hard meat eater, stretch out the meat by making stews, stir-fries and casseroles. • Vegetarian meals are budget-friendly options to meat-based meals. Bean burritos, anyone?

Nancy Clark MS RD CSSD counsels both fitness exercisers and competitive athletes in the Boston-area. Her best-selling *Sports Nutrition Guidebook* is a popular resource filled with budget-friendly food ideas. Visit [NancyClarkRD.com](#) for more info.