



My \$1.50 a Day Challenge: Eating a Plant-Based Diet on an Austere Budget

By Darshana Thacker
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I recently took on a personal challenge to eat on \$1.50 a day for five days. I was apprehensive and didn't think I could do it. Here's my story.

WHY I DID IT

Knowing that so many people struggle to feed themselves and their families made me feel obligated to give it a try. I wanted to understand what 1.4 billion people experience in their daily lives. Also, as a person on a whole-food, plant-based diet, I wanted to see what such a diet would look like on an austere budget.

WHAT WAS NEEDED

I realized early on that three important factors would make my five-day trial a success.

The first was knowledge: what food items are cheap and provide an adequate amount of calories and nutrients per dollar? I found that starchy plant foods [?] lentils, beans, rice, potatoes, carrots, corn tortillas, and beans would meet these needs. Whole-grain pasta and flour, though moderately processed, also fit the bill and seemed an appropriate compromise under the circumstances.

The second factor was accessibility: where could I find cheap ingredients and how easy or difficult would it be to obtain them? I found that nearby discount stores (like 99-cent stores) had the basics that I needed.

The third factor was time: I needed to find the time to cook. In order to get an adequate amount of food for the money, I could not eat pre-made meals. I planned on being efficient by cooking several meals at a time.

WHAT I BOUGHT

I started the challenge by spending the majority of my five-day \$7.50 budget on the following ingredients at my local 99-cent store:

10 lb. bag of potatoes = 99¢
2 lb. bag of carrots = 99¢
1 lb. bag of brown rice = 99¢
1 lb. bag of brown lentils = 99¢
2/3 lb. of brown rice pasta = 99¢
2 cans of tomato sauce = 99¢

I also bought 1/2 lb. of organic oatmeal (from the bulk section of Whole Foods) for 42¢. And finally, I set aside 30¢ for some spices from my pantry.

TOTAL SO FAR: \$6.72

WHAT I GOT

Here's how my loot shook out:

One cup of lentils makes a lot of soup – actually four big bowls! Since there are 2 1/2 cups of lentils in a 1-pound pack, I was able to make ten bowls!

One cup of brown rice will make about 1 1/2 cups of cooked rice – good enough for 3 to 4 meals. There are 2 1/2 cups of rice in a 1-pound pack.

The 1/2 lb. of oatmeal would give me 1 1/2 lbs cooked oatmeal.

The bag of potatoes contained about 18 small to medium potatoes, enough to be a substantial portion of each day's intake.

The 2/3 lb. of pasta made about five cups, enough for four large meals.

WHAT I ATE

Here was my daily menu:

Day 1: Masala mashed potatoes, lentil stew with spices, carrots and brown rice. I divided it into three meals, which was plenty for the day. I even had leftovers!

Day 2: Oatmeal with carrots, boiled

(continued)

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potatoes seasoned with salt and pepper, leftover lentil stew and fresh carrots.

Again, I had plenty to eat.

Day 3: Potato stew with tomato sauce, leftover brown rice and lentil stew, and fresh carrots.

Day 4: Baked potatoes, brown rice with carrots, curry-flavored oatmeal with carrots, sprouted lentil dal. I really enjoyed my food this day ☺ sprouting the lentils made them taste fresh and light, and baked potatoes are so good! I bought a lime this day for 33¢ (pricey for one lime!), because I was missing sour flavors.

Day 5: Pasta with tomato sauce, lentils, and carrots, plus baked potatoes. And I spent the remaining 45¢ on ½ lb. of fresh organic spinach! There was enough pasta left over for lunch the next day. I also ended up with about two pounds of unused potatoes.

GRAND TOTAL: \$7.50

WHAT I LEARNED

Eating on a low budget oriented me toward simple, unprocessed food. I actually felt quite healthy!

The main lesson I learned is that to feed a hungry world we need to focus our resources on simple starchy staple foods, which provide the highest number of reasonably nutritious calories for the least amount of money.

I also realized that living on a healthy, plant-based diet does not have to be expensive. While eating a plant-based diet on \$1.50 per day was inconvenient and challenging, I found it to be surprisingly satisfying. While \$1.50 per day may be particularly extreme, it is still entirely possible to be sufficiently nourished, even at that level. This is great news for students and those on fixed incomes.

Mission accomplished!

Chef's Note:

"Many of you have pointed out that there were not enough fresh vegetables in my diet, and I agree with you! I would look lustfully at the greens and fruits at

Whole Foods when I would shop for my client during this time (I am a chef). I didn't have any fresh vegetables (except carrots) till the fifth day when I got some fresh spinach from the farmer's market. But if I had continued on this budget, in the following days I would have been able to add more fresh vegetables and fruits. Because I had enough staples like pasta, potatoes, rice and lentils leftover for the next day or two, my daily budget of \$ 1.50 would have then gone towards some bananas and fresh greens like spinach, swiss chard, or kale. In the normal course of making meals, we supplement what we have in the refrigerator or pantry with what is missing, in order to have well-balanced meals on a daily basis. The five days were a starting point to demonstrate that we can eat a healthy whole-food, plant-based diet on a restricted budget."

Editor's Note:

To put this into context, the "Live Below the Line" challenge was an international social media campaign to raise awareness about the 1.2 billion people in the world that have \$1.50 or less to spend on food per day. To learn more, sign up, or donate, please visit [Live Below the Line](#).

We wanted to demonstrate how a whole-food, plant-based diet could be done healthfully on an extremely low budget, where sustaining yourself and your family is an urgency and the choice of fresh, organic, non-packaged, non-pesticide, non-GMO foods, although desirable, are an unaffordable luxury.