

Vegan at The Dollar Tree

By Skyler Kilmer

When I tell people that I eat a vegan diet, one of the very first questions that I get asked is, "Wow, isn't that expensive?" My answer to this question is, "It depends." Eating a vegan diet *can* get quite costly if we're buying lots of mock meats, vegan "cheeses," and other processed plant-based foods. But a vegan diet doesn't *have* to be expensive. Essential staples that I keep in my pantry are also some of the least costly items at the grocery store. Foods such as beans, lentils, rice, pasta, and canned sauces are in many budget recipes. For numerous Americans who live under the poverty line, the misconception that vegan foods are expensive is a barrier to a lifestyle change.

The Dollar Tree is an option for grocery shopping on a budget because these stores offer a range of products that are nutritious, plant-based, and \$1 or less. My biggest tip for shopping at Dollar Tree is to remember that it's not a grocery store; instead, it's a store that has a lot of groceries. Because of this, there are a few things to consider:

- Fresh fruits and vegetables are not available at most Dollar Tree stores. This menu will contain frozen or canned fruits and vegetables. Frozen produce is often nutritionally similar to fresh fruits and vegetables (1).
- Products are in smaller packages, so buying multiples of the same foods will probably be necessary.
- Some nutrients may be harder to find in foods at the Dollar Tree. Pay special attention to vitamin D, vitamin B12, zinc, iron, and calcium.

With these considerations, I've created a one-week menu that will feed a family of 4 (2 adults and two children who are 8- and 16-years-old). In November 2019 at the Dollar Tree in Greece, NY, this menu cost \$116.

One Week Vegan Menu Using Foods from Dollar Tree

Day	Breakfast	Snack 1	Lunch	Snack 2	Dinner
SUN	Tex-Mex Hash*, soymilk	pretzels w/ peanut butter	Lentil Sloppy Joe Wrap*, soymilk	sunflower seeds and canned fruit	Tuscan-Inspired Gnocchi*, juice or fresh fruit
MON	Breakfast Burrito*, soymilk	mixed nuts and applesauce	Sautéed Garbanzo Bean Wrap*, soymilk	sunflower seeds and canned fruit	Beans & Rice Soup*, juice or fresh fruit
TUES	oatmeal topped with thawed frozen fruit, soymilk	pretzels and peanut butter	leftover Beans & Rice Soup, soymilk	sunflower seeds and canned fruit	tacos: black beans, corn, rice, diced tomatoes; juice or fresh fruit
WED	raisin bran with mixed nuts and soymilk	pretzels and peanut butter	burrito w/ black beans, corn, diced tomatoes, salsa; soymilk	pita chips and garbanzo bean dip	Chili Fries*, juice or fresh fruit
THUR	oatmeal topped with brown sugar and thawed frozen fruit, soymilk	sunflower seeds and canned fruit	Peanut Butter & Jelly Roll-Up*, applesauce, soymilk	pretzels w/ peanut butter	Broccoli Stir-Fry with Garbanzo Beans*, juice or fresh fruit
FRI	smoothie w/ oats and soymilk	mixed nuts and applesauce	leftover Broccoli Stir-Fry w/ Garbanzo Beans*, soymilk	pretzels w/ peanut butter	Lentil Sloppy Rice*, juice or fresh fruit
SAT	Pancakes* topped with peanut butter, blueberries and syrup, soymilk	canned fruit and sunflower seeds	Peanut Butter & Jelly Roll-Up*, applesauce, soymilk	mixed nuts and applesauce	Lentil Bolognese*, juice or fresh fruit

*recipe included

This menu provides adequate calories and most nutrients, depending on amounts of food chosen. The menu does not have fresh fruit or vegetables and may also be high in sodium. If it's possible, adding fresh fruit (citrus, melon, berries depending on season) to this menu will increase vitamin C intake. While most Dollar Tree stores do not sell fresh produce, local farmer's markets tend to have less expensive fruits and vegetables. If finding fresh fruits is not possible for your family, 100% fruit juice is available at most Dollar Tree stores. Orange or grapefruit juice often have the most vitamin C, but other juices may have vitamin C added to them. If 100% fruit juice is used as a vitamin C source, limit it to an 8-ounce glass (or less) per day. Fortified soymilk is the drink of choice for breakfast and lunch, and legumes are in most meals to account for certain nutrients. If fortified soymilk or other fortified foods are not available and used regularly, a vitamin B12 is needed. This menu does not meet the recommendation for vitamin D. See VRG's website https://www.vrg.org/journal/vj2009issue2/2009_issue2_vitamin_d.php for information about vitamin D sources for vegans. Iodized salt should be used as an iodine source.

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Recipes

Tex-Mex Hash (serves 8)

1 Tablespoon vegetable oil (available at the dollar store, or use whatever oil is already on hand)
Two 32-oz packages frozen shoestring fries
Four 14-oz packages frozen peppers & onions
Two 15-oz cans black beans, drained and rinsed
Two 1-oz packets taco seasoning
10-oz can diced tomatoes with chilies, drained

In a pan, sauté peppers & onions and shoestring fries in oil until the fries are golden brown. Add beans and taco seasoning and stir until taco seasoning is well distributed. Cook until beans are warm. Serve topped with diced tomatoes.

Breakfast Burrito (serves four)

4 tortillas
Leftovers from Tex-Mex Hash (about half the recipe)

Spoon leftover hash into tortillas

Pancakes (serves 4)

by Reed Mangels, PhD, RD

1¾ cups all-purpose flour
1 Tablespoon + 2¼ teaspoons baking powder
3/8 teaspoon salt
1½ Tablespoons sugar
1¾ cups soymilk
5½ Tablespoons oil, divided

Combine flour, baking powder, salt, and sugar in a large bowl. Add 3½ Tablespoons of oil and mix until flour is moistened. Place the remaining 2 Tablespoons of oil in a large skillet and heat on medium-high heat. When the oil is hot, pour batter into circles about 4 inches across. Pancakes are ready to turn when the batter is bubbling almost to the middle. Flip and cook on the other side about 2 more minutes or until golden brown.

Sautéed Garbanzo Bean Wrap (serves 4)

1 Tablespoon vegetable oil
2 cups garbanzo beans
2 cups frozen spinach, thawed
2 teaspoons minced garlic
4 tortillas

In a pan, sauté beans, thawed spinach, and garlic in oil until spinach is warm and beans are slightly crispy. Add sautéed mixture to a tortilla, roll up, and serve.

Peanut Butter & Jelly Roll-Up (serves 1)

2 Tablespoons peanut butter
3 Tablespoons jelly
1 tortilla

Spread peanut butter and jelly onto tortilla. Roll tortilla into a log. Slice into approximately ½-inch slices.

Tuscan-Inspired Gnocchi (serves 4)

Two 17.6-oz packages gnocchi (the brand sold at most Dollar Trees is plant-based, but double check your packaging)

1 Tablespoon vegetable oil
Half 10-oz package frozen spinach
15-oz can garbanzo beans, rinsed and drained
1 Tablespoon minced garlic
1 handful sundried tomatoes

Cook gnocchi according to package instructions. Sauté spinach and beans with garlic in oil. Add tomatoes. Top gnocchi with veggies.

Beans & Rice Soup (serves 8)

1 Tablespoon vegetable oil
1 Tablespoon minced garlic
Two 10-oz packages frozen mixed vegetables
Two 10-oz packages frozen pepper and onions
12 cups vegetable broth
2 cups dried beans, soaked overnight, and drained
2 cups white rice (if brown rice is available, this adds even more nutrients to the dish)
Salt and pepper to taste

In a large pot, sauté garlic, vegetables, peppers, and onions in oil. Add beans and vegetable broth, heat until boiling and reduce heat to simmer for 30 minutes. Add rice and bring back to a boil, reduce heat and simmer for 30 more minutes. Add salt and pepper to taste. Make sure rice and beans are cooked to the desired texture. Serve immediately or freeze for later.

Chili Fries (serves 4)

10-oz package frozen peppers & onions
Vegetable oil for sautéing
Two 15-oz cans kidney beans, rinsed and drained
15-oz can tomato sauce
10-oz can diced tomatoes
3 Tablespoons chili powder

32-oz package frozen French fries

In a large pot, sauté peppers and onions in oil until peppers are soft and onions are translucent. Add kidney beans, tomato sauce, diced tomato, and chili powder. Simmer until warm and well flavored. Bake fries according to package instructions. Top fries with chili.

Broccoli Stir-Fry with Garbanzo Beans (serves 4)

1 Tablespoon vegetable oil
Two 10-oz packages broccoli stir-fry mix
Two 15-oz cans of garbanzo beans, rinsed and drained

In a frying pan, sauté stir-fry mix until veggies are soft. Add garbanzo beans and heat until warm. Season as desired, I think soy sauce will taste good if you have it, but salt and pepper to taste are also delicious.

Lentil Sloppy Rice (serves 8)

2 cups dry lentils, sorted and rinsed
2 cups white rice, uncooked
Water for cooking lentils and rice
Two 15-oz cans sloppy joe sauce

Cook lentils according to package instructions. Cook rice according to package instructions. Stir sloppy joe sauce into lentils, and simmer. Place lentils on top of rice and serve.

Lentil Bolognese (serves 8)

1 Tablespoon vegetable oil
10-oz package frozen peppers and onions
1 Tablespoon minced garlic
½ cup canned mushrooms
10-oz can diced tomatoes
1 cup vegetable broth
1 lb. lentils, cooked using package instructions
1 teaspoon paprika
1 teaspoon dried basil
1 teaspoon dried oregano
1-lb. box pasta

In a large pot, sauté peppers, onions, and garlic for 4-5 minutes in oil. Add mushrooms, diced tomatoes, and vegetable broth, bring to a boil and reduce heat to simmer. Stir in lentils and spices. Simmer until all flavors combine. Cook pasta according to package instructions. Top pasta with Bolognese sauce.

Reference

1. Brown MJ. *Fresh vs frozen fruit and vegetables — Which are healthier?* Published 2017.

<https://www.healthline.com/nutrition/fresh-vs-frozen-fruit-and-vegetables>

For more information:

https://www.vrg.org/journal/vj2006issue2/2006_issue2_mealplans.php

https://www.vrg.org/journal/vj2003issue1/2003_issue1_quick.php

<https://www.vrg.org/blog/2011/09/21/i%E2%80%99d-like-to-be-vegan-but-i%E2%80%99ve-heard-it%E2%80%99s-expensive-is-this-true/>

https://www.vrg.org/journal/vj2009issue1/2009_issue1_rising_prices.php

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/15/opinion/sunday/tulsa-dollar-stores.html>