Some nutritional experts tell us to eat from seven to 11 servings of fruits and vegetables daily. But many are concerned that rising food costs may lead Americans to pinch pennies by skipping all those healthy choices.

Last summer’s drought has caused a rise in prices in all kinds of food, but particularly when it comes to fruits and vegetables. There are ways to get good quality at low costs.

Get them fresh, frozen or canned, but get them. Plain frozen vegetables and fruits are often cheaper than fresh and are quick and easy to prepare. For instance, fresh green beans cost $1.03 per cup, while frozen whole green beans can be purchased for 57 cents for the same amount.

Frozen vegetables can be prepared in a few minutes in the microwave or on top of the stove. Frozen produce is as nutritious as fresh. It will also keep in the freezer for several months. So, stock up when frozen fruits and vegetables are on sale.

Canned fruits and vegetables can cost even less. The same cup of green beans when canned only costs about 30 cents. Choose those that are canned in juice or water. Skip those that have high salt and sugar in the liquids.

Most grocery stores feature weekly sale items. Study the sale flyers and only buy what is on sale that week. Shopping this way automatically gives you variety in your fruits and veggies, as what’s on sale tends to change each week. Sometimes stores offer special “bulk prices” with savings for large quantities.

Shop by the season. If you choose imported foods or those that are out of season, you’ll pay more. We are near the end of the citrus season, so choose oranges and other citrus fruits. Even though they have to be shipped in from a distance, it will soon be time for strawberries. These usually show up about the middle of April at the best prices. Asparagus is a spring vegetable, so it is just around the corner, as well. Though we won’t
have any Alaska grown vegetables for a while, we can take advantage of those in season elsewhere.

Choose those fruits and vegetables with the highest nutritional value. If given the choice, choose sweet potatoes over white potatoes. Sweet potatoes are loaded with carotenoids, vitamin C, potassium and fiber. Choose oranges over apples and spinach over iceberg lettuce.

Do it yourself. Pre-cut vegetables and fruits are convenient, but you pay the costs for others to do the work. Wash and clean them yourself for cheaper prices.

Weigh pre-packaged produce. Check out the 5-lb. bags of potatoes at the store. Some bags weigh 5.3 lbs.; others weigh 5.9 lbs. The label guarantees 5 lbs., but some are heavier than others. Choose the one that gives the most potatoes for your money.

Spoiled food costs you money. Make sure you know how to properly prepare and store all vegetables and fruits. The most expensive fruits and vegetables are the ones that you throw away instead of eating them.

Even though the snow is still on the ground, you can be planning ahead to grow your own vegetables this summer. Check out our publications and classes at Cooperative Extension Service to learn what grows best here in the Interior and for hints on successful gardening.

Adding more fruits and vegetables to your diet doesn't have to break the bank. In addition, you will feel better and enjoy better health.

Roxie Rodgers Dinstel is a professor of extension on the Tanana District Extension Faculty. Questions or column requests can be e-mailed to her at rrdinstel@alaska.edu or by calling 907-474-2426. The Cooperative Extension Service is part of the University of Alaska Fairbanks, working in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

- 30 -