



I Tried to Save Money and Eat Healthy and It Nearly Ruined My Life

I ate homemade gruel and "nutritionally complete" meal replacement snacks for a week. It only cost \$10, but I was completely destroyed by the end of it.



By [Allie Conti](#)



ILLUSTRATION BY WREN MCDONALD

With the exception of rent, I spend most of my money on consumables. Lunches I bought because I'm too lazy to make myself a sandwich in the morning, after-work beers, the too-frequent packs of cigarettes. I don't think my case is unusual, just unfortunate. After all, I wish I had more cash to spend on things like, say, going on vacation or investing. Instead, I throw tasty or mind-altering things down my gullet to anesthetize myself to the

banality of daily life. "Man Brings Lunch from Home to Cut Down on Small Joys" reads the headline of an *Onion* article that speaks to me, a person who knows that a Tuesday doesn't feel as shitty when you're stuffing a \$15 Sweetgreen salad into your head.

When I was in college and broke as a joke, I thought that financial solvency equated to being able to buy a burrito whenever the mood struck me. I still don't think that's bad logic; not having to worry about food makes the animal part of my brain feel very comfortable. But if I've learned one thing from writing about personal finance for the past few months, it's that the animal part of your brain is a selfish idiot who wants you to gorge yourself on \$12 hamburgers and take cabs everywhere instead of paying off your loans.

The traditional alternative to buying overpriced food, as any college student knows, is to eat ramen you cook on a hot plate sitting on the floor for every meal until you get physically ill and have to ask your parents for money. But surely there's a middle ground between death by sodium and bankruptcy via indulgence. What I wanted was a diet that would be cheap without taking years off my life.

So in an effort to curb my spending on food while not suffering the fate of a so-sad-it's-funny *Onion* article subject, I decided to conduct a short experiment: How cheaply could I eat while still getting all the nutrients I needed? I tested two methods out. The first involved some futuristic meal replacement, and the second involved some old-fashioned gruel.

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Meal Replacement

The first thing I did to help suss out the one perfect food was to consult a nutritionist named Laura Cipullo, who told me my plan was ill-advised. She said that there's really no way to get everything you need from just eating the same food over and over.

What she told me ran in direct opposition to the mission of trendy meal-replacement products like Soylent, which promises all the nutrition of actual food without all that annoying "picking what you want to eat and then chewing it" stuff that today's busy tech workers have so little time for.

"I think if you're in a crisis situation, like our troops abroad, these could be a good option for a short period of time," Cipullo told me. "But where are the antioxidants that you would get through fruits and vegetables and all these other cancer-fighting properties?"

I wasn't worried about cancer, though. I was only planning on doing this for a short period of time, and I doubt that anything I could ingest would taste worse than Easy Mac, with which I have a storied history. But getting a subscription to Soylent would mean all my meals would be liquid, and I wasn't ready for that lifestyle. (One of my colleagues over at Motherboard took the plunge a while ago, if you're curious how it turned out.) Instead I ordered ten MealSquares for \$30.

MealSquares, for the blissfully uninitiated, are "nutritionally complete" 400-calorie meals that come in the form of a block that is like a scone but much, much denser and also incredibly dry, like something you could build a house out of. Some people at the VICE office eat them like normal food but I have no idea how. I tried, but my body rejected the MealSquares. My jaw would not chew. I took to chasing the MealSquare bits with coffee like they were pills, and the animal part of my brain said, *What are you doing? What have we become?*

By this time the smell of any other food gave me hunger pangs; I walked past a pizza place and nearly cried.

One day and 400 calories into this experiment I realized the MealSquares contained chocolate and picked all the dark bits out of my breakfast. By this time the smell of any other food gave me hunger pangs; I walked past a pizza place and nearly cried. Cipullo had warned me of this, saying that it's necessary to eat a variety of foods not only for nutrition reasons, but for your mental health.

"We eat for psychological reasons, we eat for behavioral reasons," she told me.

Gruel

On that note, I asked Cipullo to come up with a meal designed for me that was nutritionally complete but made of constituent ingredients that were so cheap they were practically free. I did not much like her answer, which was to sauté spinach or kale with olive oil, mix it with rice, and top it with a scoop of canned tuna.

However, after two days of eating MealSquares, I was desperate for anything else. I wolfed down my tupperware of weird gruel almost immediately upon getting to the office on Wednesday morning. It was the opposite of the problem I'd had with the MealSquares, which took me so long to get down that I wasn't physically able to consume enough calories in one day to properly function.

The next day, I made more, and that was good, because I continued to love my new food invention even though it is remarkably similar to a recipe I found online for homemade pet food. When I came home that night, I added a bunch of Russian dressing to a bowl of my gruel and mixed it up to the point that it became a delicious paste. I had two more after that and fell asleep feeling like I'd just discovered the best lifehack in the world.

When my coworker dipped potatoes into some sort of sauce, then put them in his mouth, it was borderline pornographic.

That didn't last long. The next day, my mood worsened. I made a "breakfast" version of the gruel by substituting the tuna with a fried egg. At this point I noticed that I was moving very slowly and that my arms were tingling. I was also starting to freak the fuck out, staring at any food the way a dog stares at a squirrel. When my coworker dipped potatoes into some sort of sauce, then put them in his mouth, it was borderline pornographic.

On Friday I was five days into my experiment and I felt like I was moving underwater. My monotonous diet had given me a permanent hangover, only I hadn't been drinking—and when I did have half a beer I got so dizzy I worried about collapsing on the floor. The next morning, I felt worse.

"There is research coming out saying that the way the body responds to a meal will depend on your stress level," Cipullo, the nutritionist, explained. "So say you're stressed and you don't like your meal, you're going to digest that differently than something else."

I asked what she meant.

"Like, you're more likely to have bacteria leak from your intestines and go into other parts of your body." She insisted this "isn't as bad as it sounds," but, like, what the fuck?

All I know is that on Saturday, when I was out with my friend in Queens, I was suddenly struck with most intense urge to vomit I've ever experienced. I can

count the number of times I've thrown up in my life on one hand, but that sensation is pretty unmistakable. I dropped an iced coffee on the ground, fell into a cab, and concentrated really hard on keeping it together until I got in my apartment—no easy task.

The amount of money I spent on food that week? \$10.06. I don't even want to think about how much the cab ended up being.

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