



With thousands of foods to choose from, how can you get the most nutrition for your food dollar? Be an educated consumer and plan ahead. Know exactly what you need and be aware of marketing ploys that may encourage you to buy beyond your shopping list.

Keep a shopping list - and stick to it! A list jogs your memory and saves time as you walk the supermarket aisles. And with a list, you're less likely to spend money on items you really don't need. For time management, keep a running list in your kitchen of items you need to replace. Organize your list by category to match the store layout, for example; produce department, dairy case, meat counter, deli, bakery, and grocery shelves.

Avoid extra shopping trips. If possible, shop just once or twice a week. You'll spend less on impulse items and save time, too.

Check supermarket specials printed in newspaper inserts. Then plan menus around them. If the store runs out of an item on special, ask for a rain check.

Clip coupons for items you really need. Don't assume that items with coupons are always the best buy. Another brand or similar food might be cheaper even without a coupon.

Try not to shop when you're hungry. You're less likely to succumb to impulse items, including more expensive, less nutritious snacks and dessert foods.

Buy fresh produce - fruit and vegetables - in season. Most are available year-round. In season, however, the price may be lower, and the produce more flavorful. Stock up and freeze your favorites while they are in season to eat later on. Also check out local farmer's markets for fresh fruits and vegetables.

Use food labels as you shop. Remember that information on food labels can help you find foods that match your needs, provide the facts for comparison shopping, and help you get the most nutrition for your food dollar.

Buy the economy size or family packs only if you can use that much. There's no savings if food spoils and must be discarded. For foods that freeze, take time to repackage food into smaller amounts in freezer bags then freeze for later use.

Compare prices using unit pricing on supermarket shelves. To make comparisons easier, especially for similar foods in different size containers, prices are given as cost per unit, rather than price per package or container. The unit might be an ounce, a quart, or some other measurement. If the foods themselves and the units being compared are the same, the best values are the lowest price per unit.

Compare the prices on national brands, store brands, and generic brands. Store brands and generic products may cost less than national brands, since they don't have the same promotional costs. But the quality may not be as consistent as a national brand. If you watch store specials, prices may be comparable.

Stock up on canned and other non-perishable foods when they're on sale. At home, rotate your good supply, so that the "first in" is the "first out."

Buy perishable foods in amounts that will be consumed during peak quality. An extra bunch of broccoli that spoils in the refrigerator is no savings.

Consider buying foods sold in bulk bins. Because you're not paying for packaging or branding, bulk foods often cost less. And you can buy just the amount you need. Foods such as dry fruits, rice, pasta, other grains, snack mixes, and spices are among those sold in bulk.

Consider the cost for convenience. Prepared, pre-sliced, and pre-cooked foods usually cost more. Depending on your schedule, the time savings may be worth the price.

Remain flexible as you shop. If you see a better bargain or a new food, perhaps a vegetable or fruit, to try, adjust your menu.

Shop during off hours. If time is at a premium, shop when stores aren't crowded - often early in the morning, late in the evening, or midweek rather than on weekends. You may feel more relaxed as you make shopping decisions.

Pay attention at checkout. See that prices ring up as advertised or as indicated on the shelf label, especially for sale items. Quickly review your receipt as you leave the store.

"SMALL SCALE" SHOPPING

How do small households maximize their food dollars? Besides general cost-saving tips, consider these suggestions if you're a household of one or two people:

Buy frozen vegetables and fruit in bags, not boxes. As long as they aren't thawed, you can pour out as much as you need, then reseal and return the package to the freezer.

Look for foods sold in single servings. This includes including juice, yogurt, frozen meals, soup, granola bars, cookies, snacks, string cheese and pudding. That way you can have a greater variety of foods on hand. Today's stores know that small households are a big segment of the consumer market, so more and more products are available in single-serve sizes.

Share with a friend. To take advantage of the savings of economy-size packages, share your food purchases with someone else.

Shop from Bulk Bins. That way you can buy only what you need.

Repackage meat, poultry and fish into single portions using freezer wrap. Freeze these portions to use later.

Talk to the butcher and produce manager if you want a smaller amount or pre-packaged fresh meat or produce. Usually they can repackage the food, so you buy just what you need.

Buy produce that keeps longer in the refrigerator: broccoli, brussel sprouts, cabbage, carrots, parsnips, potatoes, sweet potatoes, cauliflower, apples, grapefruit, melons, oranges, pears, tangerines and berries, and store in plastic containers with a small amount of water at the bottom for freshness.

Shop for convenience. Often mixed salad greens (perhaps from the salad bar) or raw vegetables already cut and mixed for stir-fry dishes or salads cost less than buying individual foods in quantity.

Buy small loaves of bread: or wrap and freeze what you don't use right away. Hamburger and hot dog buns can be frozen and then one bun can then be thawed quickly for individual use.

DOING THE SHOPPING

- Know the difference between impulse buys and bargain hunting. If there is an item that you will use that is significantly marked down, buy it. Avoid the temptation of buying an item only because it is on sale or because it has a nice display.
- Be familiar with label terminology. For example, "Prime" cuts of meat are the most costly and the most fatty. "Select/loin" cuts of meat have the least fat.
- Compare prices using the unit price. Sometimes it is more economical to buy larger size containers, **but only if you will use them.**
- Higher and lower shelves tend to have bargains. More expensive items are placed at eye level, where we are more likely to see them.
- Displays on the end of the aisles are not always bargains. Tempting impulse buys are usually placed near the checkout lanes.
- Check the expiration date on sale items. Expiration dates that fall within the following week are still safe to buy if used immediately.

PRODUCE: FRESH vs. CANNED vs. FROZEN

Buy fruits and vegetables. It doesn't matter if they are fresh, frozen or canned – one is not “better” than another. What is important is that you buy the kind you like to eat and will use daily. Ask your grocer which fresh fruits and vegetables are in season – fresh produce “in season” is usually cheaper.

If you use canned veggies, it is a good idea to rinse the vegetables before you cook them. Rinsing can lower the sodium content and help the veggies taste fresher. If you use canned fruit, you will lower the calorie and carbohydrate content when you choose fruit canned in water or in its own juice. Frozen veggies and fruits will keep for a long time and people often find the taste is closer to the fresh item.

GETTING THE STAPLES

- Bread
- Eggs
- Sugar
- Cheese
- Margarine
- Milk
- Condiments (ketchup, mustard, mayonnaise, salsa, etc.)
- Spices (salt, pepper, garlic, basil, oregano, all-spice, cinnamon)
- Non-stick cooking spray
- Cooking oil
- Pasta
- Vegetables and fruits - see suggestions on produce
- Purchase canned kidney, black, pinto, or great northern beans, tomatoes, and tomato sauce for easy meal preparation.
- Do not forget all of your favorite food items that you eat on a regular basis.

If you stock your pantry carefully, you can fix a quick and easy meal anytime. Knowing what convenience foods are still healthful and planning your shopping trip are key.

References

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Better Homes and Gardens New Cook Book (eleventh edition). 1996. Meredith Corporation.

Duyff, R. The American Dietetic Association's Complete Food and Nutrition Guide. 1998.

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If you are concerned about any difference in your treatment plan and the information in this handout, you are advised to contact your health care provider.

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