Shopping in Each Section

# Tips and tricks for the grocery store

Written by: Mateja Savoie Roskos and Amy Spielmaker

## Bakery:

1. Look for 100% whole grain.

Choose the least processed bakery items that are made from whole grains. Make sure you know how to tell the difference between 100% whole wheat and others. For example, labels such as “multigrain”, “stoneground,” “durum wheat,” and “high fiber” do not always mean the product is whole grain. Don’t be fooled by the color of bread. Dark bread can mean they added molasses, caramel or other coloring. To make sure you are getting whole grains, read the ingredient list and look for “whole wheat” or “whole [other grain]” as the primary ingredient. Remember that “enriched wheat flour” means that the bread was made with white, not whole wheat, flour.

1. Look for the stamp.

Products with the whole grain stamp contain at least 8 grams of whole grains.

1. Look at the nutrition facts label.

A serving or a slice of bread should have less than 100 calories. A slice of bread should also have at least 2 grams of fiber, less than 225 mg of sodium. Lastly, look for 100% whole wheat or other whole grain flour as the first ingredient on the label.

1. Consider white whole wheat bread for kids.

You’ve probably seen “whole grain white” or “white whole wheat” breads. These can be a great choice for people, especially little kids, who do not like the taste or texture of regular whole wheat breads. Remember to read the ingredients list to make sure you’re getting 100% whole wheat flour.

1. Switch up your bread.

Switch up basic sandwich breads with pita breads, bagels, rolls, buns, and English muffins.

## Meats:

1. Go for whole meat.

Usually, whole meat is less money than special cuts. So instead of buying chicken breast, buy a whole chicken.

1. Get meat sliced.

Deli meats can be a high cost. Instead of buying sliced meat, buy whole cooked ham or roast beef. Then take it to the deli section to have it sliced.

1. Look for lower sodium.

Look for lower sodium deli meats, as they are usually the same price as their higher sodium alternatives.

1. Go lean and eat fish.

Choose lean cuts of meat like round, and those with “loin” in the name. Choose skinless poultry. Also try to increase your weekly consumption of fish. Salmon and tuna are especially high in heart healthy omega-3 fatty acids. Typically, stores will sell frozen fish fillets in bulk. If these are cheap, it is a good idea to stock up for quick weeknight dinners.

1. Read ground meat labels.

Ground turkey and chicken may sound like healthier options, but they are often ground with the skin. This adds to their fat count. Look for ground meats that are at least 90% lean.

1. Quality indicators.

Look for meat that has shiny, firm flesh that springs back when pressed lightly with your thumb.

## Dairy:

1. Look for less fat.

Try to pick fat free or reduced fat dairy.

1. Buy strong cheeses.

In general, the stronger the flavor, the less cheese you will need to use. Look for sharp cheddar and parmesan to give flavor to salads, omelets, and pasta.

1. Choose yogurt instead of sweets.

Yogurt can be a healthy choice compared to other dessert options that can be loaded with sugar and fat. Buy plain yogurt and add fresh or frozen fruit. This is healthier for you than buying the yogurt that already has fruit mixed in.

## Snacks such as nuts, crackers, chips, popcorn, dried fruit, cookies:

1. Avoid individual servings.

Although buying single serving, pre-packaged snacks are sometimes easier, it is a waste of money. Buy sandwich baggies and buy the snacks in bulk. Then take just a few minutes to pack snacks.

1. Look for less seasonings.

Ingredient lists play a large role in the snack aisle. Try to buy snacks with few ingredients. Look for snacks that are low in sugar, salt, and fat. Choose unseasoned options (like raw nuts and unsalted popcorn.) Choose corn chips instead of potato chips. Choose plain crackers instead of those with cheese powder or other additives.

## Canned goods such as vegetables, fruits, beans, soup, meat:

1. Keep a well-stocked pantry.

Keep a variety of canned vegetables, fruits, and beans on hand to toss into soups, salads, pasta or rice dishes. Even if there is no fresh food in the house, you can still make a healthy dinner if you have a well-stocked pantry.

1. Look for less salt, syrup, and oil.

Whenever possible, choose vegetables without added salt, fruit packed in juice, and meat packed in water. Also look for reduced sodium soups and beans. Add water to soups and reduce the amount of sodium. To decrease the salt, you get from canned beans, make sure to drain and rinse before serving.

## Baking:

1. Buy in bulk.

Baking is a good area to buy in bulk since most of the items will last for a long time.

1. What to buy and what to avoid.

Good picks in this section include whole wheat flour, evaporated milk, yeast, and spices. Avoid frostings and chocolate chips as these can be easy to snack on without noticing how much you’ve eaten.

## Condiments such as pickles, salad dressings, ketchup, mustard, BBQ sauce, peanut butter, jam, vinegar, oil.

1. Look for hidden sugars.

Watch out for hidden sugars in BBQ sauces and salad dressings. If an ingredient ends in “–ose”, it is likely sugar.

1. Choose better condiments.

Whenever you can, choose mustard as a spread instead of ketchup or mayonnaise. Ketchup is high in sugar and mayonnaise is high in fat.

1. Use a lower sodium crunch.

Keep in mind that a serving of pickles is usually half of a whole pickle and contains 12% of your daily sodium intake. Instead of using pickles in recipes for crunch, try using celery.

1. Choose BBQ sauce wisely.

The first ingredient in most BBQ sauces is some type of sugar, usually corn syrup. Choose a BBQ with a tomato product as the first ingredient.

1. Consider spending more on peanut butter.

Most peanut butters have added sugar. Although no-sugar-added peanut butter is often more expensive, it may be worth the extra money if you eat a lot of peanut butter.

1. Always have vinegar.

Vinegar is cheap and comes in many different varieties (white, apple cider, red wine, white wine, balsamic, white balsamic, rice wine). It can be replaced for extra salt in some recipes and has a long storage life. Vinegar is a good item to always have on hand.

1. Make your own dressing.

Instead of buying premade salad dressings, try making your own. All you need is vinegar, oil, water, and some type of seasoning. You can also replace some or all the oil with yogurt.

## Cereal and Breakfast Foods:

1. Buy plain oatmeal.

When buying oatmeal, stay away from those that have added sugars, flavorings and salt. The best way to do this is to stick to buying regular, uncooked oats.

1. Rainbow colored milk is not natural.

Choose cereals that have at least 4 grams of fiber per serving. The less sugar, the better. Remember that if the cereal turns your milk a different color, it probably isn’t a good choice.

1. Make your own granola.

Avoid granolas, even the low-fat variety, as they tend to have more fat and sugar than other cereals. Instead try making your own granola with oats, nuts, and honey.

1. Serving sizes may vary.

Cereal serving sizes can range from ½ cup to more than 1 cup. Make sure to consider this when choosing a cereal.

1. Avoid cereal bars.

Cereal bars can be a tempting choice for early mornings. Unfortunately, these bars can be packed with refined sugars that won’t keep you full for long. Instead, make your own granola bars and store them in the refrigerator or freezer for easy mornings.

## Frozen Food:

1. Buy frozen fruits and vegetables.

The freezer is a great way to keep healthy food in the house. Look for frozen fruits and vegetables without added sauce or syrup. These additions usually make the food cost more and also adds more calories. Frozen fruits and vegetables (without sauce) are a convenient and cost-effective way to help fill in the produce gap, especially in the winter.

1. Use frozen juices.

Frozen juice concentrates can be a cheaper alternative to bottle juices. Remember to look for 100% juice. They are also great for marinades and dressings.

1. Avoid frozen meals.

Watch out for frozen meals claiming to be healthy. These are usually very small portions that cost a lot. You would be better off microwaving frozen vegetables and serving them over pasta. This is almost as easy and costs a lot less. It’s healthier for you too.

You can also make your own frozen meals by making a big batch once a week or a month. Then put single servings into the freezer to eat later.

1. If you do buy frozen meals, spice it up.

If you do want to buy a frozen dinner, go for a basic meal. For example, buy a plain pizza that you can add your favorite vegetables to. Think of frozen meals as a starting point to which you can add vegetables, herbs, leftover brown rice, or whatever else you need to make a balanced meal.

## Ethnic foods such as pasta, pasta sauces, rice, beans, jarred salsa, enchilada sauce, rice noodles:

1. Look for tomatoes, not cream.

Choose tomato-based sauces instead of creamy or cheesy pasta sauces. Check the differences in serving size. A typical serving of marinara sauce is ½ cup with 70 calories and 2 grams of fat while a typical serving of alfredo sauce is ¼ cup with 110 calories and 10 grams of fat.

1. Go brown.

Whenever possible, buy whole wheat pasta and brown rice. These usually cost just as much or less than white pasta. If you don’t like the taste or texture of whole wheat pasta or brown rice, try making a mixture of brown and white.

1. Buy dry beans.

Buy dry beans rather than canned. They take a little more preparation, but they are much cheaper than canned. This way you have control over how much salt is added.

1. Make homemade sauces.

Jarred salsa and canned enchilada sauce can be easier, but the homemade versions are easy to make and much cheaper. Jarred tomato sauce is easier but often has added sugars.

1. Try unusual foods.

Don’t be afraid to try new foods in this section. Look for items on sale that you’ve never tried before and make a meal around them.

## Drinks:

1. Avoid soda.

Soft drinks are cheap but filled with empty calories. There are no nutritional benefits to drinking soda. Try to avoid buying it. If you need a carbonated drink, switch to flavored sparkling water. These waters have no calories and are just as cheap as soda. Sometimes they are even cheaper.

1. Functional drinks are not necessarily good.

Lately, functional beverage sales have gone up. Functional drinks are those that claim a certain nutritional benefit. Examples are sports drinks, fermented drinks, and vitamin water. These drinks usually don’t have much nutritional benefit, if they have any at all. Some drinks are loaded with sugar and can be quite unhealthy. They also cost a lot.

1. Bottled water drains money.

Bottled water is usually unnecessary in the United States because our water supply is extremely safe. Bottled water costs a lot, is unnecessary, and not good for the environment. Instead, fill a reusable water bottle with tap water.

1. Look for tea and juice.

Look for herbal teas and 100% fruit juices. Juice labels can be misleading. Make sure to read the ingredients list to make sure it is 100% juice. Remember that whole fruits are better than fruit juices. Whole fruits have fewer calories per for the amount and more fiber.

This material was funded by USDA’s Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program – SNAP. This institution is an equal opportunity provider. Utah State University is an affirmative action/equal opportunity institution and is committed to a learning and working environment free from discrimination, including harassment. For USU’s non-discrimination notice, see [Notice of Non-Discrimination](https://www.usu.edu/equity/non-discrimination).

© Utah State University 2022