

Shopping in Each Section

Tips and tricks for the grocery store Written by: Mateja Savoie Roskos and Amy Spielmaker

1 Bakery

Look for 100% whole grain. Choose the least processed bakery items that are made from whole grains. Make sure you know how to distinguish between 100% whole wheat and misleading packaging. For example, statements such as “multigrain,” “stoneground,” “durum wheat,” and “high fiber” do not necessarily mean the product is whole grain. Also, don’t be fooled by the color of bread. Dark bread can indicate added molasses, caramel, or other coloring. To ensure that you are actually getting whole grains, make sure to 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 product was made with white, not whole wheat, flour.



Look for the stamp. Products with this stamp (to the left) contain at least 8 grams of whole grains.

Look at the nutrition facts label. A serving (slice) of bread should have less than 100 calories, at least 2 grams of fiber, less than 225 mg of sodium, and 100% whole wheat (or other grain) flour as the first ingredient.

Consider white whole wheat breads for kids. You’ve probably seen “whole grain white” or “white whole wheat” breads. These can be great options 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 actually getting 100% whole wheat flour.

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

2 Meats

Go for whole meats. Usually, whole meats are going to be cheaper than selected cuts. So instead of buying chicken breasts, buy a whole chicken.

Get meat sliced. Deli meats can be expensive. Instead of buying sliced meat, purchase a whole cooked ham or roast beef and take it to the deli section to have it sliced.

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

Go lean and eat fish. Choose lean cuts of meat (like round, and those with “loin” in the name) and 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 week-night dinners.

Read ground meat labels. Ground turkey and chicken may sound like healthier options, but they are frequently ground with the skin, adding to their fat count. Look for ground meats that are at least 90% lean.

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

3 Dairy

Look for less fat. Try to pick fat free or reduced fat dairy.

Buy strong cheeses. In general, the more pungent the flavor, the less cheese you will need to use. Look for sharp cheddar and parmesan to give a kick to salads, omelets, and pasta.

Choose yogurt instead of sweets. Yogurt can be a healthy alternative 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.

4 Snacks

(nuts, crackers, chips, popcorn, dried fruit, cookies)

Avoid individual servings. Although buying single serving, pre-packaged snacks is convenient, it is a big waste of money. Buy sandwich baggies and buy the snacks in bulk, then it will take just a few minutes to pack snacks.

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

5 Canned goods

(vegetables, fruits, beans, soup, meat)

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.

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 to reduce the amount of sodium. To decrease the salt you get from canned beans, make sure to drain and rinse before serving.

6 Baking

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

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.

7 Condiments

(pickles, salad dressings, ketchup, mustard, BBQ sauce, peanut butter, jam, vinegar, oil)

Look for hidden sugars. Watch out for hidden sugars in BBQ sauces and salad dressings. If an ingredient ends in -ose, it is likely a sugar.

Choose better condiments. When possible, choose mustard as a spread instead of ketchup or mayonnaise. Ketchup is high in sugar and mayonnaise is high in fat.

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.

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

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.

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 substituted for extra salt in some recipes and has a long storage life. Vinegar is a good item to always have on hand.

Make your own dressings. 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 substitute some or all of the oil with yogurt.

8 Cereal and Breakfast Foods

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

Rainbow colored milk is not natural. Choose cereals that have at least 4 grams of fiber per serving, and the less sugar, the better. Remember that if the cereal turns your milk a different color, it probably isn't a good choice.

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.

Serving sizes vary. Cereal serving sizes can range from ½ cup to more than 1 cup. Make sure to take this into account when choosing a cereal.

Avoid cereal bars. Cereal bars can be a tempting option 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.

9 Frozen Food

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 contribute to increased cost and calorie content. Frozen fruits and vegetables (without sauce) are a convenient and cost effective way to help fill in the produce gap, especially in the winter.

Use frozen juices. Frozen juice concentrates (remember to look for 100%) can be a cheaper alternative to bottled juices. They are also great for marinades and dressings.

Avoid frozen meals. Watch out for frozen meals claiming to be healthy. These are usually very small portions that are expensive. You would be better off throwing some frozen vegetables in the microwave and serving them over pasta. This is almost as convenient and much less expensive. It's healthier for you too. You can also make your own frozen meals by making a big batch once a week or month and then putting single servings into the freezer for later consumption.

If you do buy frozen meals, spice it up. If you do want to buy a frozen dinner, go for a basic meal (like a plain pizza) that you can doctor up with your favorite vegetables. Think of frozen meals as a foundation to which you can add vegetables, herbs, leftover brown rice, or whatever else you need to make a balanced meal.

10 Ethnic foods

(pasta, pasta sauce, rice, beans, jarred salsa, enchilada sauce, rice noodles)

Look for tomato, not cream. Opt for tomato-based sauces instead of creamy or cheesy pasta sauces. Be wary of 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.

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

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

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

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.

11 Drinks

Avoid soda. Soft drinks are cheap, but filled with empty calories. There are no nutritional benefits to drinking soda, so try to avoid purchasing it. If you need a carbonated beverage, switch to flavored sparkling water. These waters contain no calories and are just as cheap, if not cheaper, than soda.

Functional beverages are not necessarily beneficial.

Lately, functional beverage sales have increased drastically. Functional beverages are those that claim a specific nutritional benefit. Examples include sports drinks, fermented beverages, and vitamin water. These beverages usually have limited nutritional benefit, if they have any benefit at all; some are loaded with sugar and can be quite unhealthy. They are also very pricey.

Bottled water drains money. Bottled water is generally unnecessary in the United States because our water supply is extremely safe. Bottled water is expensive, unnecessary, and environmentally unfriendly. Instead, fill a reusable water bottle with tap water.

Look for tea and juice. In this section, 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 actually 100% juice. Also, remember that whole fruits are better than fruit juices; they have fewer calories per volume and more fiber.

