

General Grocery Shopping Tips

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

1 Stick to the edges of the grocery store

The less processed and fresher foods are located on the edges of the grocery store and the more processed, unhealthy items are on the inner aisles.

2 Do not shop hungry

If you shop hungry, you are more likely to impulse buy unhealthy items. Also avoid shopping tired or angry. Emotions always play into our food choices.

3 Go to the grocery store during slow times

Avoid going right after 5 p.m. or near major holidays. When you go shopping on a busy day, you are more likely to spend less time looking at prices and nutrition labels.

4 Avoid overly processed foods

Avoid foods that contain more than five ingredients, artificial ingredients, or ingredients that you cannot pronounce. That's not to say that these items don't have their place, but they should be purchased less frequently than more nutritious foods.

5 Identify which foods you really want

It's hard to resist fresh-baked donuts or salty chips. To try to reduce purchasing less nutritious items, put impulse buys in the cart's child seat. Before checking out, hold each item and ask yourself if you really want or need it.

6 Always compare prices

The generic or store brand is not always cheaper (although it usually is). Also, make sure that you are checking the unit price, not the price per container. The unit price is usually per ounce and can be found in smaller print on the bottom of the price tag.

7 Look high and low

The highest priced items are usually on the middle shelves at eye level. Try looking on the top and bottom shelves for cheaper options.

8 Make a grocery list

Keep a running grocery list throughout the week. When you run out of something, don't leave it to your memory. Jot it down immediately and you'll avoid running back and forth to the store for forgotten items. Also prepare your grocery list by aisle. If you regularly shop at the same stores, organize your list so that you can easily find and check off items as you walk down the aisles.

9 Make a meal list for the week

Consult MyPlate when making a meal list to ensure that you are incorporating all the food groups. By planning the meals you are going to have for the week, you can avoid either trying to plan while you are in a crowded grocery store, or panicking and buying too much or too little. A list of meals reduces stress when it's dinnertime and you have no idea what to make, or even if you have the ingredients. Convenience is the number one factor that people consider when purchasing food. A list of meals for the week will increase convenience, both because it means spending less time at the grocery store and because it will give you direction at dinnertime. If you plan meals, there is less chance that you will be tempted to go out to eat, or eat an unhealthy, pre-packaged dinner. Why? Because you have already purchased food (some of which is perishable), and no one wants to waste money, especially if you are on a budget.

10 Make a budget

Have a clear budget before going to the grocery store and stick within your limit. If you don't know how much you can spend, you'll likely spend too much. To help stay within your budget, keep a running tally of the cost of items in your cart.

11 Be Flexible

Although you should have a plan when entering the grocery store, you should still be flexible. If you usually buy russet potatoes, but sweet potatoes are on sale, consider making a substitution. Remember that variety is the spice of life. Don't be afraid of trying new foods, especially if they are on sale.

12 Pick up a flyer

Grab the flyer or advertisement at the front of the store. These advertisements have the weekly specials and coupons.

13 Use coupons carefully

Look for coupons on shelves or on products. These sometimes offer discounts on items when purchased together (for example, a discount on lettuce with the purchase of salad dressing). These coupons could also offer discounts for multiple item purchases (for example, buy five get one free). However, be careful with these specials. If the coupon fits well into your shopping list, then go for it. If the coupon requires you to purchase more or different items than you had originally planned, it is probably best to steer clear. Apply the same rules to coupons clipped from advertisements or the newspaper. Also, keep the coupons that are printed out with your receipt. These coupons are usually targeted toward what you commonly purchase, so they may come in handy next time you visit the grocery store.

14 Buy in bulk when appropriate

For certain imperishable items, buying in bulk can save money. Some stores offer discounts when you purchase items by the case. Items that are good to purchase in bulk include canned goods, certain baking goods (like flour and sugar), some condiments, and other foods you use frequently.

15 Read the fine print

When foods are marked with deals like 10 for \$10, it doesn't mean you need to buy all 10 to be eligible for the deal. You can buy two or three and still get them at \$1 a piece.

16 Beware of items on the ends of aisles

Food manufacturers pay a premium to have their items displayed at this location. Due to this, there is little variety in products and so it is difficult to compare prices. Any item on the ends of aisles can be found on the shelves where it is easier to look at different options.

17 Know about special discounts offered

For example, some stores offer discounts if you use reusable bags instead of plastic.

18 Watch for price-match deals

Many stores, like Wal-Mart, offer price-match deals. This means that if you find an item at a different location that is cheaper than the store you are shopping at, you can bring in the advertisement and the store will match the price.

19 Get a grocery store rewards card

Many stores offer food and gas discounts to members. These cards are no commitment (they usually only require a name, phone number, and address) and they make you eligible for the sale prices that are advertised.

20 Know when specific items are on sale

Many stores plan their best sales around certain times of the year. Typically, baking items are on sale around the end of the year when people do a lot of holiday baking. Spices, condiments, and certain meats have the best prices in the summer when people are barbecuing.