

Savvy Grocery Shopping

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Food costs are one of the largest expenses for child and adult care programs. Being a smart and savvy shopper may take a little extra time, but the money saved as a result of being a wise consumer is well worth the effort. Using weekly or monthly menu plans will provide a basic grocery list to guide your grocery trips, while stocking up on the staples you use regularly allows you to buy when foods are at their lowest price. Shop online or sign up for a rewards program at your favorite grocer to get the most for your money. Each aspect covered in this course will help you to manage your grocery budget in the way that works best for you.

Depending on how far you live or work from your favorite grocery store will likely influence how often you shop. Care providers in rural areas are often farther from the store, so the time it takes to do that shopping and the length of time between trips may be longer. There may be fewer store options in remote locations, which result in higher overall prices and a lack of competition for your business. In comparison, grocery options in urban areas plentiful, and the distance from the store may be shorter. City living often means more frequent, but smaller trips to the store rather than the large “stock up” type shopping required for non-city dwellers.



Stock Up and SAVE!

Regardless of whether you live in the city or a less populated area, smart grocery shopping takes time and planning. The first step before you go grocery shopping is to create a list of the shelf-stable food items you use often. These may be referred to as staples. These foods have a long shelf life and don't require refrigeration or freezing. These staple foods might include breakfast cereals, dry pasta, uncooked rice, canned fruit, canned vegetables, and soups. Because these foods do not spoil quickly, you can stock up when they are on sale to save money. Then, based on the foods you plan to serve in the near future, add the meats (or other protein foods) and produce you'll need to the list before you head to the store. Although we don't mention it much in this course, we assume that age appropriate milk is always on your grocery list, because it is a requirement of all meals that are claimed on the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP).

Generic vs. Name Brand

When it comes to food quality, store label and generic brands are often similar quality to major national brands. For name brand products, the cost of advertising is built into the price of those big brands and marketing logos, so they often cost more than the similar products labeled for each store. Don't be afraid to try the store or generic version of the staples you use often. If you find they don't meet your needs, then go with the brand name product.



What About Perishable Foods?

For the foods that you can't easily stock up on without additional refrigerator or freezer space, like produce, bread and meat products, be flexible and take advantage of the items that are on sale each week, or whenever you do your shopping. For example, if you have ham on your upcoming menu, but ham is not on sale, consider a similar food that is on sale, like a pork roast, ribs, or chops. This type of substitution requires a slight change of menu, but still follows the variety that you've built into your meat/meat alternate food group by planning ahead. This is also true of produce. If you plan to serve broccoli next week, but broccoli is not on special this week, then look for another vegetable with similar color and nutrients to substitute in its place, like kale, spinach, or other leafy greens. Keep the variety in your menu while taking advantage of the best prices on similar foods.

Discount....SALE.....Percent OFF

Taking advantage of manufacturer or store sales is an important factor in reducing your grocery spending. Money saving paper coupons of the past are becoming less common, being replaced with digital and online offers. However, by paying attention to the timing of store promotions, you'll begin to notice predictable patterns. Some products are only on sale a couple times per year, while others are cheaper for one week each month. By knowing the usual price and how often various foods go on sale, you can start to purchase enough to get you through to the next sale event. A savvy shopper rarely pays full price for the food they buy.



Loyalty and Reward Programs

By signing up for a loyalty or rewards program at your local grocer, you may be eligible for discount prices for the products you purchase often or get a sneak peek of what will be on sale in the coming week. When making your grocery list, you may want to consult the store website to see the ad (including sale prices) before you even leave home. Some grocery stores have features on their websites or Apps for customers to download that allow the user to create a list of products purchased regularly and/or provide notifications when those items are on sale.

Buying in Bulk

Yet another way to make the most of your grocery budget is to buy extra meat, produce, and bread when it is at a lower price and freeze it for later use. This works only if you have extra freezer space available, like a chest or upright unit, in addition to your combination refrigerator/freezer. To aid in using frozen foods efficiently, freeze in small quantities, which will thaw faster than large, bulky amounts. Freeze meat in the quantity that you would usually prepare for one meal. One pound of ground meat for example, is a common package size to freeze. With produce, it is helpful to cut and blanch fruit and veggies before flash-freezing. Blanching (briefly submerging in boiling water) preserves the nutrients and color of vegetables without cooking all the way through. Flash freezing is done by spreading food out on a baking sheet or tray to allow the individual pieces to freeze. After the food is frozen, remove from the sheet/tray and place into a freezer bag

or other container to retain freshness. This allows you to take out only the amount you need without thawing the entire container.

Home Made is Money Saved



Making foods from scratch (home-made), rather than using convenience or pre-packaged food, can provide another opportunity to save money on groceries. Creating a pan of lasagna, for example, is often cheaper and results in a tastier, more nutritious meal than a frozen, ready-to-bake, lasagna. This is true of many foods that are available as ready to eat or heat-up. Many soups, casseroles, or mixed dish meals are easy to prepare and don't require expert cooking skills. Crockpot cooking is especially easy and results in tasty food with little effort. With the help of online recipes and cooking videos, your meals can be delicious and healthy without breaking the bank. Best of all, when you create your own meals from scratch you know exactly what is included.

Less than Perfect but Just as Tasty

One final suggestion to save money on your groceries is to look for discounted prices on less than perfect produce or meats that are near their "sell by" date. Stores often have a specific area for these foods. Better yet, ask your grocery store about discount prices (or even free) on items they might otherwise throw out. Some stores are able to giveaway foods that are no longer suitable for selling, while other stores are not. Please note, stores will not sell or give you food that is no longer safe to eat.

Summary of Savings

In summary, there are many ways to save money on the food you purchase, from stocking up on staples and signing up for store rewards programs to buying in bulk, and cooking meals from scratch. Although you may only save a small amount on each item, those pennies add up to save you a bundle over time. Stock up on staples, add the meat, produce, fresh bread and milk to make your meals a success. It takes some time and planning to become a Savvy Grocery Shopper and keep more of your hard-earned money, but the effort is worth the reward.



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