



Practical Ways to Trim High Grocery Prices

Fact Sheet FS1097



Cooperative Extension

*Kathleen T. Morgan, Dr. M.H., DTR
Family and Community Health Sciences*

After nearly two decades of low food inflation, prices for staples such as bread, milk, eggs, and flour are rising sharply, surging in the past year at double-digit rates, according to the Labor Department. Milk prices for example, increased 26 percent over the year while egg prices jumped 40 percent. The U. S. Department of Agriculture forecasts overall food prices will rise about 4 percent this year.

During times of high food prices, you might be asking yourself “What can I do to save money on groceries?” A smart spending plan at the grocery store is one way to make ends meet. Families need to begin by creating a food budget. It just takes a little time and know-how to put this into practice. Below are some specific money-saving ideas to consider:

Before Shopping

- **Know how much you're spending.** When you spend \$60 at the supermarket one week and \$100 the next, you may not realize that your monthly grocery bill is one of your biggest expenses. Save your receipts and analyze them – you will be amazed at how much you spend on groceries and how much you can save by shopping more carefully. Take the time to create a food budget and follow it.
- **Plan for more family meals.** Plan ahead instead of stopping at fast food restaurants on the way home from work. Make meal planning a family affair. Write up a menu of the meals and snacks you plan to prepare for the week, while making sure they are affordable and fit your food budget.
- **Invest in a good inexpensive cookbook.** With some new recipes, you can be more creative with the groceries you bring home. Look for healthy recipes that you can prepare in a short amount of time. Also look on the Internet for new, healthy recipes time to create a food budget and follow it.
- **Cruise through your fridge daily.** Check foods on hand to plan to use them before they go bad.
- **Save and make use of leftovers.** Serve for breakfast the next day or use for kids' lunches or your own.
- **Plan every shopping outing.** Experts say that planning meals in advance and making detailed shopping lists can cut your grocery spending by 20 percent or more. Check your pantry before you go shopping to be sure of what you need. Review store flyers and build your list around what's on sale and the best coupon deals. Buying in bulk, when possible, can often help save money in the long run.
- **Cook once, eat twice.** Plan meals with recipes that can be doubled easily. Serve one and label and freeze the other for a later date. Often it doesn't cost much more to make a double recipe.
- **Read your newspaper's weekly food section.** Look for local grocery sales and menu ideas.
- **Coupons.** You'll find coupons in women's and general-interest magazines. Also go online and search for “grocery coupons” and several sites will come up for free coupons.
- **Supermarket's online home page.** Log-on to the store's webpage and you will find coupons on items you may be planning to purchase.
- **Don't do all your shopping at the supermarket.** Toiletries, for instance, are usually cheaper at discount stores. A little comparison shopping could save you a lot of money.



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- **Avoid food shopping at convenience stores.** They are generally more expensive than supermarkets.
- **Leave young kids at home, if possible.** Young children want all of the products that are marketed to them and conveniently placed at their “eye” level. Avoid potential in-store battles and try to shop alone.
- **Trim your food bill by as much as 19 percent.** If you have the time to shop at a couple of different stores.
- **Consider gas costs.** Don’t drive many miles out of the way to a store to save a few more pennies.

During Shopping

- **Stick to your list.** Grocery stores are designed to entice you to buy more with irresistible marketing. By sticking to a list, you will only purchase what you need and “get in and get out” of the store quickly.
- **Shop with a calculator.** That way, you can figure whether the unit price for a case lot is really cheaper than buying one of the same item.
- **Do not shop on an empty stomach.** If you go to a supermarket hungry, you will most likely purchase more food than you need, including expensive items as well.
- **Shop “off-hours.”** Whizzing through supermarket checkouts in the early mornings or late evenings may give you time to “shop the specials” at more than one store per week.
- **Break yourself of “brand habits.”** Generic or store brands are generally better buys. Basic commodities such as sugar, flour, tomato sauce, and paper towels are often indistinguishable when the label is removed. Some store brands are different from their national-brand equivalents, however, so buy small amounts first to test quality and flavor.
- **Go easy on highly processed foods in expensive packaging.** Buy the basics and add your own sugar, spices, condiments, and sauces. You’ll save 50 percent or more, and feel much more creative. The closer a food is to its natural state, the less it tends to cost.
- **Don’t be deceived by packaging.** Check the per-unit cost of food products; sometimes small sizes are more economical than jumbo packs.
- **Beware of end caps.** Food items on aisle “end caps” are often attractively displayed to entice shoppers to make additional purchases; these displays are not always a shopper’s bargain.

- **Look up, look down.** Items on the upper and lower shelves are often cheaper. Big brands often pay big bucks for eye-level shelf space.
- **Buy fruits and vegetables in season.** Stock up when items are cheap. Check out local farmer’s markets.
- **Consider eating less meat.** Make at least one or two meatless meals each week.
- **Watch “open or use by” dates.** Look for dates marked on perishable foods to avoid buying outdated products. Also be sure to use these products at home in time to avoid waste.
- **Purchase only what you will use.** Eat everything that you buy to avoid food waste.
- **Watch the cash register.** Checkout errors can be costly. Some retailers guarantee that if the item doesn’t ring up at the correct price, you get it for free or at a discount. Pay attention to the details. Use supermarket discount cards to save.
- **Seek out supermarkets that will double coupons.** Some stores even triple the face value of manufacturer’s coupons.
- **Try for triple plays.** That’s when you use a manufacturer’s coupon and a store’s own coupon.
- **Stock up on “real” bargains and non-perishable foods.** For example, buy canned goods on sale.
- **Avoid non-nutritious foods.** This includes “junk” food snacks, sugary foods, soft drinks, etc.

After Shopping

- **Bring lunches and snacks to work.** Compared to eating out, brown-bagging can save food dollars.
- **Always send in for the rebate.** It doesn’t matter if it is on a purchase worth \$2.00 or \$50.00. It all adds up.
- **Find your green thumb.** Consider growing some of your own vegetables, fruits, and herbs.
- **Put your savings to work.** Whether it’s a trip, a car, or a savings account, have some specific goals for the money you’re not spending on food.
- **Don’t pay interest on food bought on credit cards.** This only increases the cost of food even more.

If you follow these tips and strategies regularly, you’ll start to see a difference in your food expenditures. While you can’t control the cost of food, if you manage your food dollars wisely, you will have more money in your wallet at the end of the month.

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