

Ten Tips for Grocery Shopping on a Budget

By Linda McDonald, MS, RD, LD



Feel the pinch of food prices? Chances are your patients and clients do, too. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, since March 2007, the price of eggs is up 35 percent, a gallon of milk has jumped 23 percent, a loaf of bread has climbed 16 percent and a pound of ground chuck is up 8 percent. Overall, U.S. food prices in 2008 are expected to rise an additional 4 to 5 percent—resulting in the worst food inflation in 17 years. Coupled with a weak economy, this is challenging shoppers to find more economical ways to buy groceries and prepare healthy meals. Here are some ways you can assist them:

1. PLAN MENUS AND MAKE A LIST.

A sure way to overspend is by wandering aimlessly through the aisles and tossing whatever looks good into your cart. Instead, plan menus and write a shopping list that corresponds with the store aisles. Look for menu planning and recipe help on your supermarket's Web site. Many feature tools for planning and pricing meals.

2. USE COUPONS AND REWARDS CARDS.

Did you know the Sunday inserts in your local paper have anywhere from \$50 to \$75 worth of coupons in them? Clipping coupons or printing them from Web sites (coupons.com, for example) can save you 10 to 15 percent on your grocery bill.

Also consider joining your supermarket's shopper's club. Not only will you enjoy price specials, but you may receive additional coupons for items you regularly purchase printed on the back of receipts.

3. BUY STORE BRANDS.

The Food Marketing Institute reports 56 percent of shoppers say they are economizing by buying store brand products (also known as private label). Private label brands are often 15 to 20 percent less expensive than their national brand counterparts while the quality of the food may match the national brand.

4. BUY ON SALE AND IN BULK.

Cruising the aisle for sales on shelf-stable items or products you use regularly is a great way to save money. However, buy larger quantities only if you have space to store and use the food before it spoils.

5. COMPARE UNIT PRICES.

Use the "unit price" (price per pound, ounce or pint) to compare national brands with store and generic brands, or bulk and economy-sizes with single-serve or regular-size packages. Many stores show the unit price on a shelf tag.

6. READ FOOD LABELS.

Compare ingredients and nutrients using the % Daily Value. Purchase more nutrient-dense foods by keeping the saturated fat, trans fat, cholesterol and sodium low while going for more fiber, vitamins and minerals.

7. SHOP THE PERIMETER.

Fresh produce, meats, dairy and breads tend to be on the outer perimeter of supermarkets, so start there before hitting the inner aisles for other necessities.

8. SHOP SEASONALLY AND LOCALLY.

Fresh produce often costs less when it's in season and has less distance to travel. Visit a local farmer's market or join a produce club to take advantage of seasonal fruits and veggies.

9. KEEP FOODS SAFE AND PREVENT FOOD WASTE.

Use dating information ("sell by" and "best used by") to help select the freshest foods at the market. Put cold and frozen foods in your shopping cart last and store them right away in the refrigerator and freezer. Once you're home, store foods so those with the oldest "sell by" dates will be used first.

10. PAY ATTENTION AT THE CHECK-OUT.

Make sure prices ring up as advertised or as indicated on the shelf label, especially for sale items. Some stores will even give you the item free if they make a mistake on the price.

McDonald publishes the Supermarket Savvy newsletter in Houston, Texas.

Food Group Economics 101

Produce: Seasonal produce often offers the best nutritional value for your money. However, for produce that isn't in season, canned or frozen fruits and vegetables might be more economical.

Grains: Count on whole-grain breads, cereals, pastas and other grain products to add variety to your meals at a low cost. Buy in bulk when possible and cook them yourself rather than buying quick-cooking or pre-seasoned varieties.

Dairy: Look for less expensive forms of milk, such as nonfat dry milk or gallon containers of skim milk.

Protein: Calculate cost per serving, not cost per pound, when buying protein (meat, poultry, fish, eggs and beans). Eggs, chicken and turkey are usually your most economical choices. Also consider vegetarian sources of protein like beans, peas and nuts.

Fats and Sweets: These items provide calories but little or no nutrients for the money spent.