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How Can I Save Money At The Supermarket?

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A weekly question/answer column

How Can I Save Money At The Supermarket?

Barbara Rowe and Charlotte Brennand answer:*

About 15 percent of the average American household budget goes toward meals prepared at home, brown bag lunches, and restaurant and cafeteria food. So if your annual budget is $30,000 you and your family probably spend about $4,500 a year on food.

Here are some tips to help you conserve on your food expenditures.

Don't shop:

- With someone else (shopping is easier when you're alone).
- When you're hungry or thirsty (you'll tend to buy more than you need).
- When you're feeling "blue" (you'll buy things you normally wouldn't buy).
- More often than once a week.
- At convenience stores, except for emergencies (they tend to be more expensive than supermarkets).

Before you shop:

- Check the newspaper ads for sale items.
- Set a limit for weekly food purchases. List items and approximate costs. Be sure it is not over your planned budget. Set aside a small amount for "impulse" items so you don't accidently go over your budget.
- Clip coupons from magazines and direct mail ads — but only for products you would normally buy and only when cheaper alternatives aren't available.
- Find a store that doubles the value of manufacturers' coupons or allows you to use a store and a manufacturer coupon toward the same item. If your grocer runs out of an advertised item, ask for a rain check.

While at the supermarket:

- Stick to your shopping list. If you can't find a particular item, substitute a similar item.
- Buy in bulk. This goes for pasta, canned goods and other nonperishable items.
- Pay attention to packaging. For example, frozen juice concentrate costs less than juice sold in cartons.
- Search the "day-old" baked goods section of supermarkets or bakeries. If cans are not pierced or packages are not opened, marked-down foods are safe to eat and may be a good buy.
- Check end-of-aisle displays for more markdowns, but be sure they are really bargains.

Sometimes they are regularly priced items in a different location.

- Avoid buying expensive snack foods, single-serving dinner entrees, or impulse products placed at eye level in the grocery stores.
- Avoid heavily prepared deli items such as fruit salads or shish kebabs. Cut your own meat and save. Precut melons and prepared salad greens usually are considerably more expensive per pound than if you buy the whole items and cut and assemble them yourself.
- Stock up on staples. Use nonfat dry milk for baking, or combine it with whole milk for drinking. Having powdered milk on hand will reduce emergency trips to the supermarket.
- Take a pocket calculator with you when shopping. Study unit prices which are found on the shelf by the item. When unit prices are not given, divide the price by the number of ounces or pounds to allow comparison between different size packages.
- Think about how many servings you can get from a product. A pound of round steak will provide about four servings, while a pound of blade steak will yield two servings.
- Don't assume the largest size of a product is the best buy - especially if you're using a coupon. A 75 cent coupon, doubled, could make the smallest size of a product less expensive.
- Check expiration dates.
- Go right home after food shopping so you can store perishable foods immediately.

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