

Supermarket Savings: 16 Tips that Can Total Big Bucks

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It's possible to save money shopping for groceries without cooking everything from scratch, packing your purse with coupons, or purchasing foods in season.

Here are 16 easy tips that can total big bucks. An example is given for each with the potential savings from: (1) spending less and/or (2) avoiding uneaten food (and lost grocery money).

The possible grand total you might save is given at the end of this article. Prices are rounded to the nearest 50 cents and may vary by store and region.

1. Keep a grocery list. Gas for an extra trip to the store easily can add a dollar or more to your grocery bill. Keep a grocery list where it's easily accessible, such as on the fridge and remember to take it with you to the grocery store. Stick to your list for added savings, but do stay flexible if you encounter a sale.

EXAMPLE.

(1) Gas to drive four miles for an extra trip to the store: \$1.00 (or more!).

(2) Impulse purchase of snack crackers at the store: An additional \$2.50 spent.

2. Garbage check. We lose money whenever we toss food because it spoiled before we got around to eating it. If leftovers get the "heave ho" because they're left too long, we're putting money in the garbage can. Make planning to avoid tossing foods a priority.

Consider: If wilted lettuce is a



frequent occupant of your garbage can, serve more salads at the beginning of the week. If extra mashed potatoes get tossed because they've lingered too long in the fridge, make less next time. Or recycle them as potato patties, shepherd's pie or potato soup within a day or two of making them. Some other ideas: Use ripe bananas in banana bread; add juice to smoothies or make popsicles; freeze leftovers for another meal.

EXAMPLE. Tossing a half bag of "tired" lettuce: \$1.00.

3. Avoid shopping when hungry. Everything looks good on an empty stomach. And, it's all too easy to buy something to tide us over in the car until we make it home. Eating before going shopping not only helps forestall impulse buys, it may save calories. If you're shopping with your kids, feed them in advance, as well.

EXAMPLE. Buying an energy bar at the grocery store to tide you over until you get home: \$1.50 more spent.

4. Brown bag it. If you normally eat out at noon, consider brown bagging it at least one day a week. The

typical fast food meal out easily can cost \$5.00 or more. Take food left over from the evening meal to work the next day. A peanut butter sandwich and a piece of whole fruit quickly can be packed from foods on hand.

NOTE: You may save money on your children's lunch by having them participate in the school lunch program. They can eat a balanced meal offered at a reasonable price.

EXAMPLE.

(1) Eating a sack lunch once a week: Save \$2.50 (or more!)

(2) Eating a sack lunch 5 days a week: Save \$12.50 (or more!)

5. Coupon common sense. Use coupons only for foods you normally would eat, rather than for "extras."

Don't miss out on potential sources of valuable coupons. Check your grocery receipt – sometimes there are great coupons on the back that help save money. Also, if you have access to a computer, check online for coupons. For starters, check the Web site of the store where you shop or of products you use. Often the Web site address for many foods is given on the product label.

If possible, shop on double or triple coupon days when a store increases the value of coupons. Grocery store loyalty cards may be another source of savings, offering in-store discounts to cardholders.

EXAMPLE.

(1) NOT buying that NEW dessert mix: Save \$2.00

(2) Using two 50-cent coupons for items you DO use: Save \$1.00

6. Check expiration dates.

Avoid buying a food past its prime. If

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it's on sale and near its expiration date, use it soon.

EXAMPLE. Avoid dumping a half gallon of soured milk down the drain: Save \$2.50.

7. Small scale experiments.

Before trying a new food, buy the smallest size of package. If your family doesn't like the food, you won't be stuck with a big box of it.

EXAMPLE. Limit your purchase of an exotic spice you discover your family won't eat to a small container: Save \$1.50.

8. Costly convenience foods.

How much time do you really save when you buy a convenience food? It takes just a few seconds to mix your own sugar and cinnamon rather than buying it pre-mixed. Microwaving a bowl of regular oatmeal rather than pouring hot water over a pre-measured package adds only a few minutes.

You're likely to save by cutting fruits and veggies yourself. Plus, the precut ones won't keep as long.

EXAMPLE. Buying a carton of old-fashioned or quick oatmeal provides 30 servings vs. buying 3 boxes instant oatmeal containing 10 packets each: Save \$5.50.

9. Staple food stock up. Invest in staple foods when they're on sale. Buying a boatload of bananas (and other perishable foods) isn't a very good long-term investment. Stocking up on staple items such as reduced-price canned tuna, tomato sauce or mandarin oranges can be. Remember to check expiration dates.

EXAMPLE. Stocking up on 10 cans of food reduced by 20 cents apiece: Save \$2.00.

10. Bulking up when the price is right and you can use it. First, do the math and check if you actually do save by buying a larger package. The cost of two foods of the smaller size may be a better price than the larger one. Plus, will you use the food while the flavor is still tasty? Always check it out and if the larger size meets your criteria, go for it!

EXAMPLE. Buying a 5-pound bag of rice instead of a 1-pound bag: Save \$1.50.

11. Store brand savings. Store brands are comparable in nutrition to name brands. And, taste-wise,

there may be little difference. In some comparisons, they have been preferred over the name brands.

Some store brands may vary more in size, color or texture than the name brands. However, this may be unimportant, depending on their use. A less than perfect appearing vegetable may be just fine if used in a casserole or soup.

EXAMPLE. Buying two store brands and saving 50-cents on each: \$1.00.

12. Prevent food flops. Check preparation methods for unfamiliar foods. Perhaps tropical fruit looked enticing at the store. However, if you're not sure how to prepare it or where to find more information once you bring it home, think again. Or, a new cut of meat—do you slowly roast it or can it be grilled? Either way, find out or risk having a food flop.

Often the produce person or the meat manager at the store can give you some tips. Many produce departments have books with descriptions of all the items, what they taste like, how to prepare them, etc.

EXAMPLE. Purchasing a bag of self-rising flour without reading the directions and discovering it won't work in your recipes: Lose \$2.50

13. Beware of snack attacks. Unless you're fairly active and need the calories, enjoy snacks, such as chips, cookies, candy, etc. in limited amounts. You'll save money and may lose unwanted pounds at the same time!

EXAMPLE. Buying one less bag of chips weekly: Save \$2.00.

14. Shop the specials. Plan your menus around sale items, especially more expensive purchases, such as meat. A dollar saved is even better than a dollar earned, as you don't have to pay taxes on it!

Buying several packages of meat when it is on sale and freezing it may save quite a bit. "It is safe to freeze meat or poultry directly in its supermarket wrapping but this type of wrap is permeable to air," advises the U.S. Department of Agriculture Food Safety and Inspection Service (USDA/FSIS). "Unless you will be using the food in a month or two, overwrap these packages as you would any food for long-term storage using airtight heavy-duty foil, (freezer) plastic wrap or freezer paper, or place the package

inside a (freezer) plastic bag." If you plan to repackage family packs into smaller amounts, USDA/FSIS also recommends using these materials.

While raw ground meat maintains optimum quality in the freezer for 3 to 4 months, larger pieces of meat like steaks or chops will maintain optimum quality for 4 to 12 months, according to USDA/FSIS. At 0 degrees F, frozen foods remain safe indefinitely. The safest way to thaw meat is in the refrigerator on a plate on the bottom shelf so it doesn't drip on other foods.

EXAMPLE. Buying meat on sale: Save \$2.00

15. Think before you drink.

Buy a reusable water bottle and fill it with tap water. Your investment soon will pay for itself. Limit consumption of soft drinks and fancy coffees.

EXAMPLE. Drinking tap water vs. buying a 12 pack of bottled water: Save \$4.00.

16. "Checkout" temptation.

OK, you've almost made it to the finish line...don't stumble now as you approach the checkout lane. As you're waiting in line, think twice before buying some last-minute temptation.

EXAMPLE. Resist the magazine with the latest diet: Save \$3.50.

GRAND TOTAL: The more of these tips you can use and the more foods you can use them with, the more you can save. Case in point: If you were able to use each of the preceding examples in one shopping trip, you could save as much as \$40 a week.

Multiply by 52 weeks and the savings would be...TA DA!...over \$2,000 yearly!

"Thank You!" to the following dietitians, extension educators and dietetic interns for reviewing this article and adding their suggestions for saving money at the supermarket: Cindy Brison, Sarah Doerneman, Jennifer Dunavan, Shannon Frink, Cindy Goody, Kayla Hrbek Hinrichs, Lisa Kopecky, Toni Kuehneman, Jennifer Meyer, Amber Pankonin, Joan David Sather, Kathy Tack, Kathy Taylor, Jennifer Yen, Jessica Wegener and Linda Wetzel.

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Recipe Central at <http://lancastr.unl.edu/food/recipe.shtml> provides sample "Basic Foods for Fridge, Freezer and Cupboard" grocery list and related recipes; cooking directions for various foods; "Kitchen Helper" tips on ingredient substitutions, food storage, recipe conversion; plus MORE!