



UNIVERSITY OF  
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IFAS EXTENSION

## Stretching Your Supermarket Dollars<sup>1</sup>

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There are many things that you can do to stretch your supermarket dollars. Try some of the following suggestions.

### Before You Go to the Store

#### Check What's At Home

Your major reason for going to a supermarket is to buy food, so check your refrigerator and pantry before going. You may be able to combine a food on hand with an ingredient to be bought to make another meal without spending much money. When checking supplies on hand, list staple items that you are out of.

#### Check Grocery Ads

Most newspapers carry ads each week for major food stores in their areas. Some stores also advertise on television and radio. Use these ads to compare products and prices from different stores.

In an effort to attract customers, food stores often feature "specials" (items at reduced prices) and "loss leaders" (items sold below cost). These may be bargains that will save you money if these are items that you use. Remember, however, not all advertised

items are specials or loss leaders. Also, compare the prices of comparable products.

For produce consider freshness and quality. For meats consider grade, closeness of trim for fat, and bone.

#### Clip Coupons

Manufacturers and food retailers often use coupons to promote the sale of certain products. Clip and save coupons for products you will be buying. Circle the expiration date of each coupon so that you may use it before it expires. Coupons are sometimes used to promote the sale of new products. However, most are for highly advertised brands. Coupons can save you money on items that you use. However, using a coupon does not guarantee the item will sell for less than another brand or a store brand. Compare costs.

#### Plan Your Meals

Make a draft meal plan for the week. Keep in mind bargains and specials. Remember to plan nutritionally balanced meals. A plan will save you preparation time, money and can ensure better meals.

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Develop your shopping list from your plan and add the list of staples you need to buy.

### **Make A Shopping List**

Organize your shopping list by food type and department. For example, list all meats together. Do the same with other types of products such as canned foods, dairy products and cleaning supplies. This helps you to avoid forgetting things and having to make another trip to the store.

When making the list, keep in mind the store layout if you know it. For example, if the produce is located on the right at the front of the store, list your fruits and vegetables first. Don't make the list too rigid. Example, you may list "green vegetable, broccoli." When you are in the store, look at the green vegetables. Compare what is available, quality, and cost. Buy broccoli if it is the best buy. But, if another green vegetable is a better buy, purchase it.

Stick to your list. Add to it only if you see special bargains that will save money. Make substitutions when better buys are found.

### **Select The Store With Care**

Most stores have some bargains. Rarely does one store have all the best buys. One store may have good buys on meat, another on canned goods. A third store or market may have the freshest fruits and vegetables. If stores are not located near each other you may shop one store one week and buy enough bargain items for two or three weeks. The following week shop the other store.

Remember, prices do vary from store to store. Prices change, so keep alert. Shop in the stores that offer the best prices and services for the kinds of products that you buy.

### **When to Shop**

#### **Shop Alone If Possible**

When your mate or children go shopping with you generally the total bill increases. Children often pressure parents to buy items advertised on television or that they see and want. This can cause unplanned spending. Some people are excellent shoppers, but

unfortunately many aren't. Often a husband will add gourmet or non-essential items to the grocery basket or select other impulse items.

### **Shop When Stores Aren't Crowded**

If possible, avoid peak crowded times such as Friday afternoon and Saturday. Crowded stores mean long lines and sometimes distractions while shopping.

### **Avoid Shopping When Tired Or Hungry**

When you are tired you'll buy anything to "get through and go home." You may have to make another trip to the store for forgotten items. If hungry, you'll probably overbuy, especially prepared foods.

### **Shop Weekly Or Less Often**

Plan your shopping so that you can buy groceries for a week or more at one time. You spend more money if you go to the store several times during the week.

### **In the Store**

#### **Don't Rush Shopping**

Give yourself enough time to compare and think about the best buys and to find bargains. If rushed you may not be able to concentrate on getting the most for your money. Remember, grabbers are usually losers in the shopping game.

#### **Keep Priorities Straight**

Wheel your cart past "empty calorie" foods such as nibblers, candies, soft drinks. Look for foods that are nutrition packed. You want value for your dollars.

### **Buy In Quantities That Are Most Economical For You**

Consider your family size, eating patterns, and storage space. If you are shopping for one or two people, it may be unwise to buy the largest size package even if it costs less per unit. Look for the best buy in the size package you can use before it becomes stale.

### **Read Labels: Know What You Are Buying**

Labels provide much useful information. Read the list of ingredients. Ingredients are listed in the order of their predominance by weight. If water is listed first and sugar second, the product is mostly water and sugar. Most food products carry nutritional labeling. Use this information to choose foods to help balance your diet.

The quantity of contents is listed on a product's label or package. Read the amount. Do not rely on appearance. Appearance can be misleading.

### **Consider The Packaging**

Some products have excessive packaging which contributes to landfill problems. Others have containers that do not break down in the environment. Over packaging, such as individual servings, often increases the cost of the product. Consider how a product is to be stored and used. Choose the package that best protects the product and the environment and meets your needs.

### **"Cents Off" and Introductory Offers Can Save Money**

By law, products labeled "cents off" must be reduced the designated amount in price. If these items are on your shopping list they may save you a little money.

### **Provide Your Own Labor**

Not all "convenience" foods cost more, but some do. There are many services that you can provide for yourself to save money. For example, cut up your own chicken, slice and grate your own cheese, or slice your own fruit.

### **Stock Up On Staples When Prices Are Especially Good**

If staple items are on sale at bargain prices, and you have adequate storage space, it's a good time to stock your pantry. Buy only the amount that you can use before the food becomes stale.

### **Compare Costs Of Various Forms Of Food**

Supermarket prices vary among retailers, brands, and markets. Fresh produce varies more in price than other forms of food. Because of the nation's highly commercialized marketing system most types of fresh produce are available throughout the year.

To get the most food for the least amount of money compare the various forms, such as canned versus fresh, frozen, dehydrated, and partly or completely prepared. Compare the cost per edible measure.

Locally grown fruits and vegetables are usually very reasonable priced when they are in season (and they taste great)! However some may require extra preparation time and there may be some waste (ex: corn shucks). Locally grown produce is usually sold at "Farmers Markets" and in small food stores. Major chains rarely carry local produce because of limited supplies.

Consider the cost of the form of food that fits your needs. You may be making a peach cobbler. Sliced peaches or canned "broken pieces" may be your best buy for the cobbler.

### **Compare The Cost Per Serving Of Various Foods**

It is important to compare the cost per serving. For example the amount of fat and bone varies from one cut of meat to another. Ground beef provides 4 servings per pound while spare ribs give 1 1/2 servings per pound.

### **Compare The Unit Price of Various Forms, Brands and Sizes**

When you have determined the least expensive form of food, compare the unit price of various sizes and brands. The unit price is the cost per unit of weight or measure, for example, cost per ounce. Often the larger size containers offer the best unit price, but not always. If a brand sells more small size containers than large ones the smaller ones may cost less per unit. Also, store brands usually cost less, but not always. Compare unit prices.

Most supermarkets make it easy for shoppers to compare prices by providing unit pricing. Unit price information is printed on a label attached to the shelf directly below the product. Money can be saved by using this information.

### **Use Open Dating Information**

Many products are stamped with a date. Most open dates are shelf removal or quality assurance dates. If a product will be stored for some time before being used, buy it as fresh as possible. If the food is to be used immediately, the date isn't as important.

### **Reduced For Quick Sale**

Often products reduced in price are good buys. For example, day-old bread usually sells for about half the regular price. Products that are reaching their "sell by" dates are often reduced in price. Most perishable products carry a "sell by" date. This enables the shopper to select items that can be used before they spoil. Some stores reduce the price on meats that have turned dark, or ham that has changed color. If they are to be used immediately they may be bargains. Overripe bananas may be a bargain at a few cents per pound if they are to be used immediately, but a poor investment to use the following day. Carefully inspect any product reduced in price to be sure it is a bargain to you. Make sure it will not spoil before you have a chance to use it.

### **Avoid Impulse Buys**

Unplanned purchases can wreck your budget. Don't be unduly influenced by big displays, or fancy ads. These are designed to promote sales. Just because an item is sold in a bin or on a promotional table does not guarantee it is reduced in price. Compare it with similar "regular priced" products to see if it is a bargain.

### **Check To See If Multiple Priced Items Are Less Expensive**

Compare the price of items that are regularly priced individually with their total cost if sold in multiples to be sure there is a price reduction. For example if the individual item sells for 59 cents each and 3 are advertised for \$1.29, there is a price reduction of 48 cents.

In the above example, with today's computers you may also be able to buy only one item at the reduced price of 42 cents.

### **Checking Out**

Watch to be sure breakable and crushable items are correctly bagged. Also, food items that are easily bruised must be carefully packed. Bananas crushed by a can of peas aren't very appetizing.

### **On the Way Home**

It is important that foods be carried home from the grocery as quickly as possible. Special care should be given to make sure frozen foods do not thaw. Highly perishable foods such as meats and milk should be handled with care to ensure they stay cool. Fragile foods such as eggs and fresh produce should be placed so that they will not be bruised or crushed on the trip home.

When you reach home put foods away quickly. Frozen and refrigerated foods should be handled first.