
Tips and Tricks for Saving Money at the Grocery Store

While prices are always increasing, costs have increased more than usual for some foods in the past year. The US Bureau of Labor and Statistics (2022) has provided a Consumer Price Index to see changes in food prices throughout the past year. From November 2021 to November 2022, prices for flour and prepared flour mixes have increased by 24.9%, eggs have increased by 49.1%, butter and margarine have increased by 34.2%, and lunchmeats have increased by 18.4%. These price increases are just a few notable and significant increases. Not all food prices have increased, however. For the same period, prices decreased for bacon and related products by -1.1%, beef and veal by -5.2%, and uncooked beef roast by -8.1%.



Photos: Adobe Stock

With the increase in food costs, finding ways to save money at the grocery store might seem challenging, however, it is not impossible. Sara Berndt, the Director of Online Marketing and Technology for FT Reynolds Co. (which owns and operates five Reynolds Market stores in Eastern Montana), has shared some tips and tricks to help save money at the grocery store.

- **Most nutritious and healthy options are located on the store's external walls** and are usually less processed and prepared. More prepared foods usually have higher labor costs and are more expensive per unit.
- **Name-brand foods are typically located at eye level** on shelves and are usually more expensive than value brands found higher or lower on shelves.
- **Products that attract kids or impulse purchases are at the register** and on aisle end caps.
- **Read the advertisement for clues on savings.** Ad flyers and sales tags use phrases “must buy” or “limit of” or “mix or match” with specific promotions. For example, if an advertisement says Mix and Match Sale: Buy three for \$4, all three do not need to be purchased to get sale prices. If the ad indicates “must buy,” then all three items need to be purchased to get the sale price. This can vary by retailer, but paying close attention to the wording in promotions can help save money.
- **Check tags, unit pricing, and size.** The price tag for food items usually lists unit pricing (for example, 21.5¢ per oz). This allows the customer to compare prices and determine the best buy for varying sizes of an item.
- **Meal plan with sale items.** This is a great way to save money when grocery shopping; many sale items are generally in season and at their freshest.
- **If you don't see an item, ask;** items are shifted around the store for marketing purposes and might have been moved to a new location.
- **Check the discount bin;** some items are slightly damaged in shipping or close to their expiration date and are designated for a quick sale (however, not every store operates this way). The discount bin is a great place to check for deals.

- **Ask for a rain check.** If grapes are on sale at your local grocery store, and there are no grapes to be found, you can ask for a rain check. Some grocery stores will give a coupon to honor the sale price of the grapes for a later date when they are back in stock.
- **Buy local.** This helps support local farmers and ranchers. Additionally, the further food travels to the grocery store, the more it might cost due to the cost of travel.
- **Do not shop hungry,** as the temptation to buy can lead to purchasing items that are not needed or overspending.

In addition to Berndt's suggestions, America Saves, a campaign through the Consumer Federation of America has more tips to help save money on food.

- Instead of ordering lunch or picking up lunch, bring lunch to work to help save money.
- Plan for meals before shopping by creating a list and sticking to it.
- Try ingredient substitutions to reduce cost; applesauce is a good substitution for eggs, which are more expensive.
- To save time and money, try doubling or tripling a favorite recipe for lunches for the week or freeze them for meals later.

The tips and tricks shared are good starting points for helping save money on food. Try picking a few to start with and incorporate them into a trip to the grocery store or try meal planning and sticking to the plan. Making minor changes can add up to savings over time.

Carrie Krug is a Family and Consumer Sciences and 4-H Youth Development MSU Extension agent in Carbon County.

