

HEALTHY EATING STARTS AT THE GROCERY STORE

Learn How To Make Smart Choices When Shopping For Food

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Going grocery shopping is not usually on anyone's "top ten" list of fun things to do. It can become even more of a chore if you are strapped for time, or if you have to take your children with you who insist that the brightly-colored sugary cereals or sugary snack items they saw on the cartoons that morning are something they cannot live without. Instead of coming home with bags of wholesome goodness, you once again succumb to mostly pre-packaged processed foods and frozen entrees with cans of vegetables, a jar of applesauce, a bunch of bananas and a carton of 2% low-fat milk thrown in for good measure. This is your cycle—buying what's quick, easy, familiar and storable—not what is most healthful.

However, you've made the decision that you want your family to eat more nutritiously. Since eating at home starts with the choices you make at the grocery store, it's the best place to begin. Also, you can find plenty of affordable and healthy foods at the regular grocery store—no need for a special trip to a special store. You can start with a few small steps that will add up to big changes in your shopping experience and outcome.

Where Do You Begin?

First, start with reviewing healthy recipes and plan your family's snacks and meals for a week or two. If this is too much planning at once, start with only lunches or only dinners. Remember, you can always make enough for two days worth of dinners or portion out the leftovers and freeze them for another meal in the following weeks.

Next, review your recipes and your pantry and make a grocery list—and stick to it while you're shopping!

Caution, don't go grocery shopping when you're hungry. You've heard it said before, but it really is true. Going to the grocery store with a growling stomach (even with a list) can lead to all sorts of impulse buys that you will probably regret once you get home and feed yourself. If you are comfortably full while grocery shopping, the goodies in the bakery, the frozen pizza rolls, and the bags of sodium-laden snack foods will be easier to resist. But, if you feel like you haven't eaten in a week, then all of a sudden everything you look at becomes irresistible—especially fattening comfort foods.

How to Shop Healthy

By following some simple tips, you can slowly begin to turn your grocery cart around from processed and pre-packaged to fresh and nutritious without sacrificing taste.

- Shop the perimeter of the grocery store for the bulk of your items – this is where you will find the freshest foods (e.g., dairy, produce, meat, seafood). Visit the other isles only to get your necessary staples.
- Buy fresh food – there is no better measure of healthy eating than making fresh food instead of something that comes out of a can or box. If more than half of your groceries are prepared foods, aim to evolve your eating habits by choosing fresh vegetables, lean and unprocessed meats, fresh fruits, seafood and low-fat dairy products.
- Buy frozen fruits or vegetables – if you can't find the fresh produce or fruit you want or it's out of season and too expensive, it's okay to buy frozen. In fact, frozen vegetables and fruits are flash frozen right after they are picked and many times hold their nutritional value better.
- The American Heart Association recommends two servings of fish a week focusing on those varieties that are a good source of Omega-3 fatty acids. Try salmon—it's available, affordable and not-fishy. Other *fresh* seafood items are great choices, too—shrimp, crab, other fishes and scallops.

- When you are shopping for meats, be sure to read the red-meat packages; some may say “enhanced” with injected water, flavorings, and preservatives that you don’t need. Choose your poultry wisely, too; many whole birds are injected with high-sodium flavorings and still have their high-fat skin. It’s best to choose lean turkey and skinless chicken.
- When buying dairy, choose the no-fat or low-fat versions—skim (no-fat) or 1% or 2% (low-fat) milk, reduced fat cheeses and sour cream. Don’t forget about yogurt—it’s a wonderful source of calcium and it is great for sauces instead of heavy cream, and it packs well for lunches.
- Buy a variety of canned items—vegetables, fruits and beans to keep on hand to toss into soups, salads, pasta or rice dishes. Whenever possible, choose vegetables without added salt and fruits canned in juice. Also, consider tuna packed in water, and low-fat, low-sodium soups for quick and convenient meals.
- Switch to all whole grains—this includes pasta, bread, rice and cereal. You should limit the amount of refined white flour you eat. Be sure to read the label and make sure you are buying a 100% whole wheat or 100% whole grain product. If the ingredients list refined wheat flour, then it’s made from the same wheat as white bread. Consider trying other whole grains including quinoa, bulgur and barley.
- Beverages should be kept simple—water, 100% juice, low-or non-fat milk, black/white/green tea and coffee. Skip buying soda, energy drinks, and sugary juices.

Other Tips for a Healthy Cart

- Be adventurous – try a new vegetable or fruit each week. If you have to take your children with you, let them be part of the decision.
- If buying pre-packaged or pre-cut veggies and fruits is more convenient for you, it’s worth the extra money if your family will eat them and it makes it easier for you to pack a healthy lunch.
- Choose foods that have few additives and are minimally processed. In fact, if a food contains more than five ingredients, artificial ingredients, or ingredients you cannot pronounce—avoid it.
- If you do not want your children eating sugary or sodium-laden snacks, simply don’t buy them. Be sure to have plenty of quick and healthy snacks on hand instead. Same goes for you. If you know you cannot have potato chips, chocolate, or cookies in the house because you will eat them, don’t buy them.
- Don’t buy foods that resemble fast food at home such as pre-packaged pizza, French fries, hot dogs, chicken nuggets, corndogs, etc. Also, skip the processed meats (lunch meats)—they are laden with salt and lack nutrients.
- Read labels – if you are not sure what you are looking for on a nutrition label, educate yourself at www.fda.gov and click on “Food” and then “Labeling & Nutrition.” The site fully explains the nutrition facts label and important areas for you to pay attention to—including fats, calories, fiber, sugar and nutrients.

Taking a new approach to grocery shopping may still not make it your favorite task. However, realizing it’s where you hold the power to make important decisions that will affect your family’s health and well-being, hopefully will give you the desire to approach this task more thoughtfully than before.

About the Foundation The Pottstown Area Health & Wellness Foundation’s mission is to enhance the health and wellness of area residents, providing education, funding and programs that motivate people to adopt healthy lifestyles. Visit www.pottstownfoundation.org for more information about the Foundation. Discover Pottstown area’s new online community at www.missionhealthyliving.org to learn and share great information on how to lead a healthier life!