

THE DEBT DIVA

Clarky Davis

Guide to **Saving Money on FOOD & GROCERIES**



The Debt Diva's Guide to Saving Money on Food and Groceries



Getting Started

To save money, you need to know how you're spending it! For one month, collect all your receipts from grocery stores, discount stores and restaurants. Write down any food, drink or snack purchases from vending machines or convenient stores.

At the end of the month, total all of your expenses. This will be your starting point!

Food is a necessary expense. It's also an expense that has drastically increased. In 2008 the United States experienced its largest 17-year jump in food costs, increasing 4.5 percent.* According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion, the average cost for a moderate meal plan for a family of four in the U.S. is \$771.10 per month.

This may seem pricy, but there's a good chance you are spending more, especially if you dine out regularly. The good news is that by planning ahead and shopping smart, you can reduce your food and grocery expenses by 50 percent.

* U.S. Dept. of Agriculture.

Step 1:

Review each grocery, discount and convenience store receipt and highlight any non-necessity items purchased like magazines, soft drinks and snacks with little or no nutritional value. Do not include these on future shopping lists and make a commitment to keep unnecessary items off the list.

Step 2:

Create a meal plan. Be sure to include snacks for a one to two-week time period. Select meal choices that don't require exotic, gourmet ingredients and stick with recipes that rely on basic food staples. If you dine out frequently, limit your family to one or two meals out each week at a low to moderate cost eatery. If you spend \$30 each week on a restaurant dinner, that adds up to \$1,560 a year. Just by reducing that dinner out to once a month adds up to \$360, a \$1,200 savings in a year or about \$100 every month!

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Step 3:

Make your shopping list, and check your cabinets to confirm the items you actually need. There's no need to purchase items you already have! Start your search for coupons and discounts online, in your mailbox and in the newspaper. If possible, purchase all the items you need for the entire week or two weeks in one trip. You'll need a comprehensive list, but once you get the hang of it, you'll find that you save time, fuel and money because it's one fewer trip to the store.

Step 4:

Shop at the right place, at the right time. Plan your grocery shopping trip on Sunday evening. Most stores run their sales and promotions from Wednesday through Tuesday. Clip your coupons from the Sunday paper and head to the store that night so you can start the week with a full pantry. For basic food staple items, shop at discount grocery stores, but purchase any nonfood items, such as cleaning supplies and paper products, at a discount retailer. For produce, check out your local farmer's market or consider participating in a community supported agriculture group.



Clipping Coupons

It takes just a few seconds to clip coupons but each 30 cents you save leaves you with more money in your pocket. Here are five things to consider when you're clipping coupons:

1. Clip all the coupons you think you might use. This isn't a time for brand loyalty. This week, the toothpaste you use might be on sale (and your coupon makes the sale even bigger). Next week, it could be a different brand.

2. Start with the Sunday paper. Even if you don't regularly subscribe, you will most likely save enough with the coupons to pay for that one newspaper.

3. Check the mail. In my neighborhood, coupons for restaurants, as well as groceries are delivered to my mailbox. It's tempting to throw them away, but that "buy one, get one" free entrée could be a debt-free date for you and your special someone.

4. Sign up for coupons online. Some Web sites allow you to download and print coupons at home. Read the fine print carefully. Some Web sites give you coupons in exchange for your personal information for their marketing databases – always read the site's privacy policy before you commit. But you can't beat the savings:

- www.couponmom.com
- www.coupons.com
- www.bargainist.com

Seven Simple Grocery Shopping Tips!

1. Bring a calculator: Groceries quickly add up and keeping a calculator on hand can help you decide if you really need that package of chocolate sandwich cookies! Keep a running total as you place items in the shopping cart. If you go over budget, start putting things back on the shelf.

2. Buy in season: Save by buying foods that are in season. Seasonal foods cost less because they are plentiful, such as fresh lettuce, spinach or strawberries in late spring and early summer or apples, squash or sweet potatoes in the fall.

3. Buy the Family Pack: When buying meat at the grocery store, look for "family packs" or "value packs." These bundles cost less per pound, and you can divide the meat and freeze what you don't use right away. These packs can also be purchased for pasta, soups and many other items at the store. Buying family packs can also help you make it between those bi-weekly trips. Double check your deal by dividing the total cost by the item amount to another place your calculator comes in handy.

4. Comparison Shop: Don't focus entirely on the total package price; consider the unit price. The unit price highlights the price per ounce, pound or other measurement. The unit price is often listed on the sticker located on the shelf where the item is displayed. Comparing unit prices on similar products will ensure you are getting the most for your money!

5. Resist Marketing Temptation: Like high-end department stores, grocery stores offer special marketing displays enticing you to spend cash! Avoid island displays, promotional product exhibits and recipe related item placement, according to www.about.com's "Cut Your Grocery Tips." Don't forget that higher priced items are usually displayed in the middle of the shelving display at the customer's eye level. Search shelves high and low for lower priced items.

6. Leave the family at home: Visit the grocery store alone. This means leaving the spouse and kids at home. You are more likely to stick to your list and plan without the distraction of your family putting extra items in the shopping cart.

7. Frequent Shopper Rewards Programs: If you frequent a specific grocery store, take advantage of the rewards program. Rewards programs allow shoppers to receive significant discounts on basic food staples, not just exotic, high-end food items. Most rewards programs also offer special "points" promotions where customers can earn one point for every \$1 spent in the store. Points can then be redeemed for discounts.

Quick Tips:

- Always make a shopping list before going to the store.
- Never shop when you're hungry! It's hard to resist food shopping temptations on an empty stomach.
- When offered a choice, always purchase store brand or generic food items over brand name products.
- Always check a product's expiration date to ensure you are purchasing fresh products.
- Pay attention at check out. Watch your items as they are scanned to make sure you are charged the correct price and that your coupons and discounts are being included.
- Cook large portions and freeze the leftovers. If you are in a pinch for time and don't want to cook, you won't be tempted to eat out with a freezer full of yummy food.

5. Combine coupons with a sale whenever you can! This is particularly true for grocery shopping. Between the rewards cards, coupons and knowing when to stock up and when to pass up a deal, you can save significant cash.

3. If you do plan to eat out in the evening, go before 6 p.m. to take advantage of early bird specials.

4. Skip the alcohol. Designer cocktails can cost \$8 – \$12 each. Most people have two drinks with their meal. Having after dinner drinks at home instead of at the restaurant will save you \$16 – \$24.

5. Instead of ordering a full entrée, opt for an appetizer with a salad – a \$15 savings. If you are particularly hungry have a small snack of fruit or a granola bar before you head out for dinner.

6. If you have children, look for restaurants that offer child-friendly discounts and promotions. I especially love “Kids Eat Free” nights at Moe’s Southwest Grill, IHOP and Lonestar Steakhouse.

7. Check the bill. Many restaurants have standard gratuity fees they tack onto the end of the bill, according to www.paylessforfood.com. Usually mandatory gratuity fees are applied for large groups, but some restaurants do apply a mandatory tip for groups as small as four or six people. Review your bill before adding on a tip so you don’t pay gratuity twice.

Dining Out

While it’s much cheaper to cook your own food, everyone loves a night out on the town, dining at a favorite restaurant.

If you enjoy eating out regularly, there are some easy ways to reduce your restaurant spending:

1. If you are a regular customer at a particular eatery, register for the restaurant’s e-mail newsletter. You will know when special promotions are being held and receive coupons for discounts of at least 15 percent.

2. Opt for brunch or lunch instead of dinner out. Most restaurants offer a lunch menu that is the same or similar to their dinner menu; however, the entrée prices are usually \$5 – \$10 cheaper than at dinner time.

For more great tips on how you can save money on everyday household living expenses, visit www.thedebtdiva.com. You can also become a fan on Facebook and follow me on Twitter @debtdiva.

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