



%

\$100 OFF

Save

\$ OFF



Hidden SAVINGS at the supermarket

4 secrets that really work to cut your grocery bill

A can of soup, a carton of milk, a hunk of cheese—most items at the supermarket aren't more than a buck or two, but when you get to the register, whammo! The grand total seems to keep getting grander. That's because most food prices are going up. Way up. The cost of eggs rose nearly 30 percent and prices of juices and dog food climbed nearly 15 percent in the past year. So if you've never been into clipping coupons or comparing prices, now's the time to get serious about it. Our new survey shows that women who use coupons and store-loyalty cards reported saving an average of \$678 a year, or more than 10 cents of every grocery dollar. Here's how to uncover the best coupons and the biggest money-wasting traps at your supermarket so you can save big.



1

GO ONLINE FOR COUPONS

If clipping coupons from your Sunday paper seems like a waste because they're not for the stuff you buy or because the savings don't seem to amount to much, get clicking!




Whatever you're looking for—canned goods, pet food, cleaning supplies, you name it—there's probably a coupon for it online right now. And we found many coupons offering \$1 or \$2 off, as well as freebies. So what's the catch? Even the best sites, such as the ones listed below, can take some patience. They all, for example, require that you download software to print coupons. The sites say they do this to limit the number of coupons you can print, to keep you from saving images of coupons that could be altered, and to ensure the quality of the bar code image. At some sites you can register to get e-mail alerts. One more bummer: Well-publicized fraud in recent years, in which coupon images were scanned and then forged or sent out in mass e-mails, has



caused some grocers to stop accepting online coupons. Some others impose restrictions. Publix, for example, accepts money-off coupons but not ones for free products. But some supermarket chains have embraced online coupons. Stop & Shop accepts online coupons, not to mention competitors' coupons. If you're unsure whether your store takes online coupons, ask at the customer-service desk. And make sure that your coupon is legit. Look for a scannable bar code and expiration date, says Matthew Tilley, director of marketing for CMS Inc., one of the largest processors of grocery coupons. "If either piece is

Coupon sites to check out

And what you need to know about them

SITES	SIGN-UP REQUIREMENTS	HASSLE FACTOR	WHAT YOU'LL FIND
SmartSource.com 	No registration required—nada, nil, zip.	Must download software to print coupons.	We found 98 grocery coupons, including \$1 off Entenmann's Little Bites and 40 cents off Sugar in the Raw.
Coupons.com 	For optional registration, all you need to give the site is an e-mail address and a ZIP code.	Must download software to print coupons.	We found 89 coupons, including 55 cents off Green Giant bagged frozen vegetables and 60 cents off Pillsbury Crescent rolls.
CoolSavings.com 	For optional registration, you have to give the site your e-mail address, mailing address, gender, and birthdate.	Must download software to print coupons.	We found 89 grocery coupons, including \$1 off two Post cereals and 50 cents off Dixie Ultra plates.

TIP

When registering at coupon sites, don't give your everyday e-mail address—you may be barraged with offers. Open a free mail account on a service like Gmail or Yahoo and use that address instead.



missing, the coupon may be a fake,” he says. In addition to checking out the coupon sites at left, try manufacturer Web sites, such as Polandspring.com, for money-off coupons and free samples. We found a \$1-off coupon for two Poland Spring eight-packs, \$8 off a bag of Iams dog food at Iams.com, and \$3 off an Oral-B electric toothbrush at OralB.com. At Tide.com, we found an offer for a free detergent sample. You can also sign up for e-mail newsletters that include coupons; use your store-loyalty cards with those coupons or use coupons on sale items, and save even more. To find manufacturer sites like these, do a Google search on the names of your favorite products. You'll also find coupons at eBay, where sellers hawk envelopes full of them. Problem is, buying a coupon voids its value under most manufacturers' rules, so we advise against this practice.

Can buying groceries online save you money?

That depends. A member of our staff swears by online food shopping. “It saves me money because I know how much my weekly bill should be, and I can see the running total on the screen,” she says. “If I'm going over, I take stuff out of my cart.” But what you gain in impulse control you might lose in selection and price. When we used Peapod, a popular national service associated with our local Stop & Shop, we noticed several drawbacks right away. For starters, not everything in the store was online, including many types of fresh fish. And there's a \$50 minimum per order and a \$9.95 delivery fee.

Still, we were pleasantly surprised to see that prices for the items themselves were close to what we'd pay in a store. When we took our online order and priced it at a local supermarket, our total was \$51.57—nearly identical to the \$51.64 we paid with Peapod before the delivery fee. And product quality was fine: The apples weren't bruised, the lettuce wasn't brown, and the ham was thinly sliced, just as we had specified, although two eggs were broken.

One of the newer entrants into the online grocery business is Amazon.com, which charges no delivery fees on orders over \$25. But it sells mostly warehouse-club-size packages. And you may have to wait longer for some orders.

The bottom line Shopping for groceries online probably won't save you money (except on your gas!), but it will save you a schlep to the store. So the extra you'll probably pay for delivery and the wait for your food might be worth it.

PROS AND CONS OF ONLINE FOOD-DELIVERY SERVICES

Pros

- **It saves on gas** costs and wear and tear on your car.
- **It saves time.** No driving to and from the store and waiting in line.
- **It's convenient.** You can order at any time.

Cons

- You can't squeeze the oranges or eyeball the meat.
- You usually must pay a delivery or service fee.
- Someone must be at home to accept delivery.
- The selection may be limited.



TRY SOMETHING NEW

Let's face it: When it comes to certain grocery items, you buy the same thing over and over again without giving it a second thought. That attitude might be causing you to spend more than you need to at the supermarket.

A new study by the Nielsen Co. shows that when it comes to items like coffee, cheese, margarine, and mayonnaise, you're apt to be on auto-pilot: You grab the same old brand you always buy. That's OK—hey, we're all devoted to the brand of mayo Mom used—but you may be missing cheaper products that are just as good. Store-brand products can be as much as 50 percent cheaper, and in the tests our labs have done over the years, they often turned out to be just as good or better than brand-name products. If you haven't tried the cheaper store brand in a while, give it another chance, because manufacturers reformulate those products all the time. Also watch out for all those new, more expensive products constantly being rolled out. Research has shown that many of us are variety junkies when we scan the shelves, especially for cookies, salad

dressing, chewing gum, salty snacks, and breakfast bars. In those product categories, we're suckers for colorful packaging, no matter how much the triple-chocolate-fudge-swirl cookies cost. The

lesson: Next time you're shopping, check the price range on everything you buy to see if you might be able to get it a lot cheaper, and don't be afraid to try new brands, including store brands.

Price check Items you're likely to buy without comparing prices—though you should!

GROCERY ITEM	PRICE RANGE	POSSIBLE SAVINGS
Peanuts	0.21 to 0.25/oz.	16%
Cold cuts (sliced Virginia ham)	\$5.99 to \$8.99/lb.	33%
Cheese (sliced American)	\$4.29 to \$7.49/lb.	43%
Coffee (whole bean)	\$5.39 to \$9.99 for 12-oz. bag	46%
Margarine (soft)	\$1.31 to \$2.50/lb.	48%
Oatmeal	0.07 to 0.14/oz.	50%
Popcorn (microwave)	0.50 to \$1.05 per bag	52%
Mayonnaise	0.12 to 0.27/oz.	56%
Cola	0.01 to 0.10/oz.	90%
Bottled water	0.01 to 0.11/oz.	91%

Grocery tab

What women told us about their food shopping habits

44%

rarely or never use coupons. (Crazy ladies!)

66%

hit at least two grocery stores a week.

55%

watch checkout scanners and find mistakes.

17%

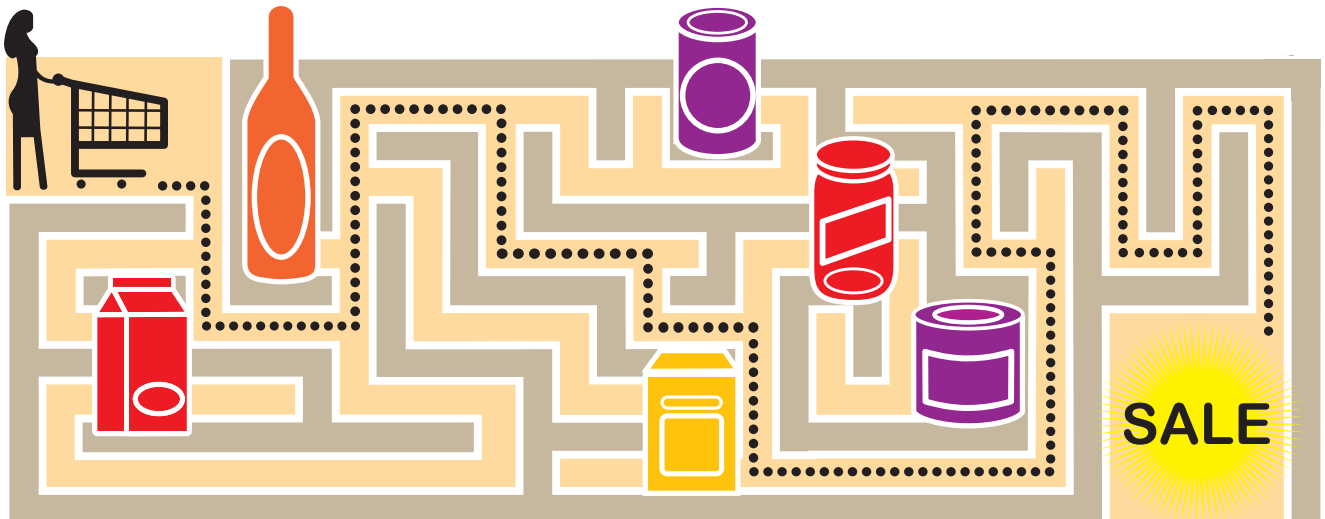
are coupon clippers who saved \$50 plus on a single trip.

3

AVOID SPENDING TRAPS

Your best efforts at planning your shopping trip with coupons and grocery lists are likely to be sabotaged the minute you set foot in the supermarket.

A large percent of purchasing decisions are made right in the store, and that's exactly the way your supermarket likes it. Strategically placed signs, flashing coupon dispensers, and product displays all can have an effect on what you buy and how much you spend. But you can beat the stores at their own game by staying on the lookout for traps at these spots: ▶



TIP

On a diet? You're likely to spend more at the supermarket. The reason: Dieting can wear down your self-control, say researchers. So if you're trying to lose weight, be extra vigilant when food shopping.

writes Paco Underhill, in "Why We Buy: The Science of Shopping" (Simon & Schuster, 2000). "It goes from slightly above eye level down to about knee level." Look above and below that zone to discover bargains.

■ AT THE ENTRANCE

Product posters on the selling floor or at the entrance can increase the likelihood you'll buy the product.

■ AT THE FRONT OF THE STORE

Is there a friendly lady handing out free samples? If so, there's a greater chance that you'll buy the product—if not now, then later.

■ **IN THE AISLES** Placing shelves or racks at an angle, or "chevroning," means you'll see more products as you pass by.

■ **ON THE SHELVES** "There's a reliable zone in which shoppers will probably see merchandise,"

■ **AT THE ENDS OF THE AISLES** Retailers place impulse items there because you're more likely to see them.

■ **AT THE BACK OF THE STORE** Staples such as milk and eggs are in the very back. You have to pass by or through several aisles to reach them, which means you'll probably make a few more unplanned buys.

True coupon queens share their secrets

These women spend next to nothing on their weekly shopping. Here's how.



GEORGINE KACZMAREK

Age 60 ■ Hometown Ridgefield, N.J.

Claim to fame She saves 70 percent on her weekly grocery bills. "I have gotten \$200 worth of items for \$2.50, and most of that was tax."

GEORGINE'S BEST TIPS

Subscribe to multiple papers. "I subscribe to three local papers. I also subscribe to a Web site called Refundcents.com. I advertise what coupons I'm looking for and send other people coupons I don't use. It's like a giant swap meet."

Take advantage of in-store coupons. "A lot of those tear pads and blinky machines in the aisles have tear-off coupons and rebate offers. With the rebates, when you mail them in, you're now on the manufacturer's list and they'll send you coupons."

Combine coupons with store-card specials. "A lot of times you can get that product for free, or almost for free."

Get organized. "Buy an envelope with index-card dividers for categories of coupons. They'll be easier to find that way."



STEPHANIE NELSON

Age 44 ■ Hometown Atlanta

Claim to fame She runs a Web site called CouponMom.com.

STEPHANIE'S BEST TIPS

Scour the newspaper. "Many places will sell the Sunday newspaper at a discount after noon. If you're only going to buy one paper, buy the one with the biggest circulation. It'll have the most coupons."

Wait to use coupons. "Usually when the coupon comes out, the item will be at full price in most stores. But wait a couple of weeks. It'll probably go on sale, and you'll save even more."

Shop at different stores. "I have four stores I like to shop at, two supermarkets and two drugstores. But I don't go to each one every week. I look at store circulars and decide which ones have the best deals that week. I plan my shopping list accordingly."

Don't buy all your health and beauty aids at the supermarket. "I like CVS's rebate program. You get rebates in the form of store credit, which you can use to buy something else. If you use a coupon on top of the rebate, sometimes you can get the item for free or even make money."



STOCK UP ON SALE ITEMS

If you've got the room, load up on staples when they're on sale. You can really save a lot.

When we glanced at the sales circular for our local store, we spotted bottom-round roast on special for \$1.79 a pound and Quilted Northern bath tissue on sale at two for \$11. If you've got the space in your freezer and your cabinets, it pays to stock up. (Watch those use-by dates, though, and check out the chart at right for info on how long you can store things.) Even better, hit more than one store and scoop up the bargains. That's a technique called cherry-picking, and a recent study by the Wharton School and Southern Methodist University shows the cherry pickers saved an average of \$17.45 in a day. You can cherry-pick at supermarkets as well as at discount stores like Wal-Mart and Costco. Even if you can't be bothered with store-hopping, it's worthwhile to glance at what's on sale at several area grocers. "Stores will watch each other very closely, especially if you've got two or more supermarkets within a 5-mile radius," says Paul Weitzel, managing partner of consulting firm Willard Bishop in Barrington, Ill. If one store has a brand of frozen pizza on sale, its competitor may well cut the price too. Hey, every little bit helps!



Proper hoarding

How long and where to keep your supermarket sale stockpiles

If you buy a bunch of this...	You can keep it unopened this long...	As long as you store it here...
Butter	4 months; otherwise it may lose its flavor and texture.	In the freezer. Wrap it airtight; butter can pick up the flavor of other foods.
Canned goods	Acidic foods like tomatoes, 18 months; low-acid foods like vegetables, 2 to 5 years.	In a cool, dry place. Check the expiration dates for more exact times to toss.
Cereals (ready to eat)	Up to 1 year.	In a cool place away from heat and moisture.
Chocolate (solid and filled)	Check package dates. Solid chocolates may last 9 months. Filled may last 1 to 4 weeks.	In a cool, dry place. Some makers suggest freezing chocolate if it will not be eaten soon.
Coffee (canned)	Up to 2 years.	In a cool, dark spot.
Frozen dinners	For 3 to 4 months.	In the freezer, natch.
Jams, jellies	Up to 1 year.	In a cool place; even the fridge will do.
Juice boxes/bottles	Juice boxes for 4 to 6 months; bottled juices for 12 to 18 months.	In the pantry in a cool, dark spot. Boxes can also be frozen.
Pasta sauce	About 1 year (check the label for dates).	In the pantry in a cool, dark spot.
Soda	Nondiet soda in cans, 9 months; all diet soda and all soda in plastic bottles, 3 months.	In a cool spot out of direct sunlight.