



MIDDLESEX COUNTY PUBLIC HEALTH DEPARTMENT

TIP SHEET

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Smart Grocery Shopping



Good nutrition starts with smart choices in the grocery store. Cooking up healthy meals is a challenge if you do not have the right ingredients in your kitchen; but who has time to read all the food labels and figure out which items are the most nutritious and the best buys? Grocery shopping can be a daunting task, simply because there are so many choices. However, with a little guidance, healthy choices are easy to find in any supermarket.

Here are some tips to help you when navigating your grocery aisles:

- **Plan Ahead** - The process starts even before you head to the grocery store. Before you set out for the market, plan your meals for the week, and create a list to shop from.
- **Do Not Shop Hungry**- Shopping on an empty stomach often results in impulse purchases that may not be the healthiest.
- **Choose Variety**- Most of us tend to eat the same foods over and over again. But variety really is the spice of life. To help meet healthy eating guidelines, you should be filling your cart with plenty of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, dairy, lean meat, fish, poultry, beans, and nuts. Be adventurous; aim to try a new fruit or vegetable each week.



Produce- Spend the most time in the produce section, the first area you encounter in most grocery stores (and usually the largest). Choose a rainbow of colorful fruits and vegetables. The colors reflect the different vitamin, mineral, and phytonutrient content of each fruit or vegetable.

- **Breads, Cereals, and Pasta**- Choose the least processed foods that are made from whole grains. For example, regular oatmeal is preferable to instant oatmeal. Choose whole-wheat bread and pastas, brown rice, grain mixes, quinoa, bulgur, and barley. To help your family get used to whole grains, you can start out with whole-wheat blends and slowly transition to 100% whole-wheat pasta and breads.
- **Meat, Fish, and Poultry**- The American Heart Association recommends two servings of fish a week. Be sure to choose lean cuts of meat (like round, top sirloin, and tenderloin), and opt for skinless poultry. Also, look for “antibiotic and steroid free” or “free-range” brands of meat. Most importantly, watch your portion sizes. Your protein choice should be the size of the palm of your hand!



Dairy- Dairy foods are an excellent source of bone building calcium and vitamin D. There are plenty of low-fat and nonfat options to help you get three servings a day, including drinkable and single-serve yogurts, and pre-portioned cheeses. If you enjoy higher-fat cheeses, no problem -- just keep your portions small.

- **Frozen Foods-** Frozen fruits and vegetables (without sauce) are a convenient way to help fill in the produce gap, especially in winter. Some frozen favorites include whole-grain waffles for snacks or meals, portion-controlled bagels, 100% juices for marinades and beverages, and plain cheese pizza with an extra dose of skim mozzarella cheese and a variety of veggies.
- **Canned and Dried Foods-** Keep a variety of canned vegetables, fruits, and beans on hand to toss into soups, salads, pasta, or rice dishes. Whenever possible, choose vegetables without added salt, and fruit packed in juice. Tuna packed in water, low-fat soups, nut butters, olive and canola oils, and assorted vinegars should be in every healthy pantry.

Other important tips to remember while shopping include:

- Shop the perimeter of the grocery store, where fresh foods like fruits, vegetables, dairy, meat, and fish are usually located. Avoid the center aisles where junk foods lurk.
- Choose "real" foods, such as 100% fruit juice or 100% whole-grain items with as little processing and as few additives as possible. If you want more salt or sugar, add it yourself.
- Stay clear of foods with cartoons on the label that are targeted to children. If you do not want your kids eating junk foods, do not have them in the house.
- Avoid foods that contain more than five ingredients, artificial ingredients, or ingredients you cannot pronounce.
- Read labels and do not buy something without reading it. Get out of the habit of only looking at the fat content.
- Look for the term "hydrogenized" or "partially hydrogenated oil." Avoid anything that has it. The food industry fills most packaged goods -- cakes, pastries, crackers, cookies, cereals, etc. with possibly the most damaging fat of all, trans fatty acids. This is something to also avoid.