



Using SNAP/WIC Benefits at the Grocery Store

The grocery store is the primary place where WIC and SNAP benefits are used. WIC benefits can only be used on nutritious food/beverage items determined by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). SNAP, however, allows the purchase of a wide variety of foods, including many that are not the most nutritious choices. To ensure that you are selecting nutritious foods when using SNAP benefits, be sure to read labels to check on the amount of added sugar, sodium and bad fats (three common problems in highly-processed foods), and look for high amounts of vitamins, minerals, proteins and fiber (typically found in whole, unprocessed foods).¹ Below are suggestions for using benefits wisely — to maximize the nutritious foods you bring home to prepare healthy meals with your family.



A person writes a list. Photo by energpic.com via Unsplash

Meal Planning Before Shopping

One of the first things you should do before going to the grocery store is sit down and plan your meals for the week, or at least for the next few days. Use some suggestions from *Fun (and Nutritious!) Family Meals: Preparing and Consuming Meals as a Family is Healthy, and Fun!* (found at: nrpa.org/CommitToHealth) and/or the *Foods of the Month Newsletters* (found at: nrpa.org/CommitToHealth) to think about your family-based meal planning. When you plan your meals in advance, you are less likely to buy things that you don't need, and your WIC/SNAP benefits will go further. Also, meal planning helps ensure you buy foods that are the most nutritious for your family. When planning your meals, consider the following:

- **See what you already have** in your cabinets, freezer, and refrigerator — avoiding the purchase of items you already have will make your WIC/SNAP benefits go further.
- Think about your family's **schedule for the week** — what types of foods do you need for quick dinners, lunches on the go, or grab-and-go breakfasts? Write down what type of meals you need on specific days.
- If you have a few **recipes you'd like to try with your family**, pull them out and include them in your meal planning.
- If you need ideas for nutritious meals, check out the **MyPlate Kitchen** where you can search for recipes by course, cuisine, type of food, etc. (choosemyplate.gov/myplatekitchen).
- Think about **leftovers** — how can you “repurpose” leftovers. For instance, if you have left over lean beef after making a meat sauce for whole wheat spaghetti one evening, use the leftover lean meat with sautéed onions and peppers and garlic, a touch of salt, pepper, and brown rice to put inside half a bell pepper (see recipe on page 4) to roast for supper the next night!
- **Use a planner**, such as the *Create a Grocery Game Plan Weekly Calendar* found below, to help organize all your meal planning ideas. Then create a grocery list, maybe using the *Create a Grocery Game Plan Grocery List* like the one found below.



A woman grocery shops. Photo by Boxed Water Is Better via Unsplash

¹ Read, “Cutting Back on Processed Foods You Eat and Drink” found at www.nrpa.org/CommitToHealth to learn more about what processed foods are, and some suggestions for getting more whole foods into your family meals.



Tips for Smart, Budget-wise, Healthy Shopping at the Grocery Store

The ChooseMyPlate program ([choosemyplate.gov](https://www.choosemyplate.gov)) by the USDA has a number of great suggestions for shopping for nutritious foods in a budget-friendly way at the grocery store. They have organized tips by the MyPlate categories, as shown below — this is a fun, useful way to think about how to shop using your WIC or SNAP benefits!

Fruits and Vegetables

Find fruits and vegetables in the produce section, frozen foods and in the canned and pantry food aisles. Compare prices to find the best buys.

- Buy “in season” produce. They are usually less expensive and are at their peak flavor. Buy only what you can use before it spoils. For more info check out the “Seasonal Produce Guide” from SNAP-Ed Connection.
- Try buying canned. Choose fruit canned in 100% fruit juice and vegetables with “low-sodium” or “no salt added” on the label. These products are just as nutritious as fresh, and often cost less.
- If you have the freezer space, buy frozen vegetables without added sauces or butter. They are as good for you as fresh and may cost less.
- Canned and frozen fruits and vegetables last much longer than fresh and it’s a quick way to add fruits and vegetables to your meal.
- For a great resource on selecting healthy and affordable produce, take a look at [Smart Shopping for Veggies and Fruits](#).

Protein Foods

Find protein foods throughout the entire store. They can be found in the fresh meat case, frozen foods section, dairy case, and canned and pantry food aisles.

- Some great low cost choices include beans and peas, such as kidney beans, split peas, and lentils. Use these good sources of protein for main or side dishes. Beans and peas cost far less than a similar amount of other protein foods.
- To lower meat costs, buy the family-sized or value pack and freeze what you don’t use. Choose lean meats like chicken or turkey. When choosing ground beef, make sure it’s lean (at least 93% lean) ground beef.
- Seafood doesn’t have to be expensive. Try buying canned tuna, salmon, or sardines – they store well and are a low cost option.
- Don’t forget about eggs! They’re a great low-cost option that’s easy to prepare.
- For more tips on making healthy protein choices, check out [Vary Your Protein Routine](#).

Grains

Find grains in many areas of the store, including the bread, cereal, snack, and pasta and rice aisles.

- Make half your grains whole grains. Throughout the store, check ingredient lists and pick the items that have a whole grain listed first.
- Whole grains include whole wheat, brown rice, bulgur, buckwheat, oatmeal, whole-grain cornmeal, whole oats, and whole rye.
- Rice and pasta are budget-friendly grain options.
- Choose hot cereals like plain oatmeal or whole grain dry cereal.
- Try new whole grain snack ideas, like switching to whole-wheat crackers or popping your own popcorn.
- For more information on grains, check out [Choosing Whole-Grain Foods](#).

Dairy

Find dairy foods in the refrigerated and pantry aisles.

- Choose low-fat or fat-free milk. They provide just as much calcium, but fewer calories than whole and 2% milk.
- Buy the larger size of low-fat plain yogurt instead of individual flavored yogurt. Then add your own flavors by mixing in fruits.
- When it comes to cheese, look for “reduced fat,” or “low-fat” on the label.
- Always check the sell by date to make sure you’re buying the freshest dairy products.
- See [Got Your Dairy Today?](#) to learn more.

Other

- Drink water instead of buying sodas or other sugary drinks. Tap water is easy on your wallet and has zero calories. A reusable water bottle is a great way to have water with you on the go. For other drink ideas, see [Make Better Beverage Choices](#).
- Save time, money and calories by skipping the chip and cookie aisles.
- Choose the checkout lane without the candy, especially if you have kids with you.



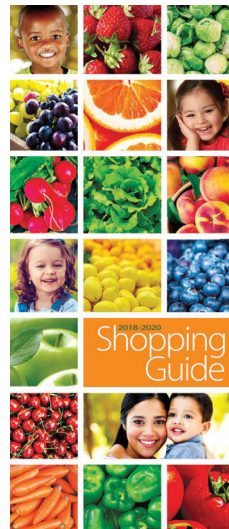
WIC-specific Shopping Suggestions

WIC limits the types of foods you can buy with your benefits to those that have specific nutritional value. So one of the first things to do is find out if your state has a *WIC Shopping Guide* that explains in detail what items you can purchase. An internet search should show if your state has such a guide. For example, to see if there is a guide for Minnesota, type, “WIC shopping guide MN.” The images to the right are from the *MN WIC Shopping Guide*.²

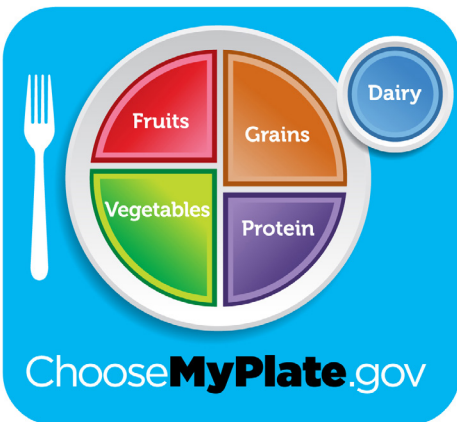
When in the grocery store, you can confirm which items can be bought with the WIC benefit by looking for special hangtags that typically appear on the shelves below the items.

Preparing and cooking meals with your family using your WIC benefits can be a fun activity! Consider using ChooseMyPlate.gov as a guide for creating a nutritious meal that includes all the parts of the plate. For example, make veggie scrambled eggs for breakfast (see the recipe on page 5), which incorporates eggs as protein (purple section) and veggies (green section).

Complete the meal by adding a side of whole wheat toast as grains (orange section), layer the toast with peanut butter for protein (purple section) and include a handful of blueberries, kiwi and/or banana as fruits (red section). Play around with other ideas for “decorating” the toast, making it fun for your children. See the image below where fruit is used to make faces on whole wheat toast that is layered with peanut butter!



Cover and sample spread of a WIC Shopping Guide. Graphics by Minnesota WIC Program



Toast with animal faces made of fruit. Photo via allsherecooks.com

² <https://www.health.state.mn.us/docs/people/wic/vendor/fpchn/shopguide.pdf>



Healthier Stuffed Peppers

6 Servings

- ½ cup brown rice
 - 1 cup water
 - 1 pound lean ground beef (could be pre-cooked if using leftovers)
 - 2 cloves garlic, minced (2 tsp prepared, minced garlic)
 - 1 onion, chopped
 - 6 large bell peppers of any color (try a few!)
 - 1 (8 ounce) can tomato sauce (or 8 oz spaghetti sauce)
 - 1 tbsp Worcestershire sauce (or 1 tbsp soy sauce)
 - 1 pinch salt and ground black pepper to taste
 - 1 (8 ounces) can tomato sauce (or 8 ounces spaghetti sauce)
 - 1 tsp Italian seasoning (or parsley, basil or oregano)
 - ¼ cup grated Parmesan cheese, optional
1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees F.
 2. Bring brown rice and water to a boil in a saucepan. Reduce heat to medium-low, cover, and simmer until rice is tender and liquid has been absorbed (about 45 to 50 minutes).
 3. Cook and stir beef, garlic, and onion in a skillet over medium heat until meat is evenly browned and onion is softened, about 5 minutes. (If using leftover pre-cooked beef, sauté garlic and onion in 2 tsp vegetable oil over medium heat until the onion softens, being sure not to let the garlic burn. Add leftover pre-cooked beef and mix.)
 4. Remove and discard the tops, seeds, and membranes of the green, red, and yellow bell peppers. Arrange peppers in a baking dish with the hollowed-out sides facing upward.



Stuffed peppers on a platter. Photo via allrecipes.com

- (Slice the bottoms off the peppers, if necessary, so that they stand upright.)
5. In a medium-sized bowl, mix the beef, cooked rice, 1 can tomato sauce, Worcestershire/soy sauce, salt and pepper in a bowl. Spoon an equal amount of the mixture into each hollowed pepper.
 6. In another small bowl, mix the remaining tomato sauce and Italian seasoning (or parsley, basil or oregano) in a bowl. Pour mixture over the stuffed peppers.
 7. Bake in the preheated oven, basting with sauce every 15 minutes, until the peppers are tender (about 1 hour). Sprinkle the peppers with grated Parmesan cheese after baking.

Adapted from [allrecipes.com/recipe/219447/healthier-stuffed-peppers](https://www.allrecipes.com/recipe/219447/healthier-stuffed-peppers)

How does this recipe match MyPlate?
 Lean beef (protein; purple section); peppers, onion, garlic, tomatoes (veggies; green section) brown rice (grains; orange section); have some fruit for dessert (fruits; red section) to complete the plate!



Save More at the Store!

The USDA made a list of some ideas for saving money at the grocery store. Check out their suggestions below and see how much you can save!

1. **Ask for advice.** Grocery stores, ethnic markets, dollar stores, retail supercenters and wholesale clubs can offer good deals. Ask friends and family where they shop and find their best bargains!
2. **Eat before you shop.** Grocery shopping hungry can lead to impulse buying and unhealthy food choices.
3. **Read the sales flyer.** Sales flyers are usually released mid-week and can be found at the store's entrance, in the newspaper or on their website.
4. **Use coupons.** Only use coupons for items that you know you'll use. If you don't need an item right away, save the coupon and see if it goes on sale.



Scrambled eggs on a plate. Photo by Gian Cescon via Unsplash

Power Veggie Scrambled Eggs

4 servings

- 2 tsp vegetable or olive oil
- ¼ cup green peppers, chopped (can be frozen variety)
- ¼ cup red or yellow or orange peppers, chopped (can be frozen variety)
- ¼ cup onions, chopped (can be frozen variety)
- 4-6 eggs, lightly beaten
- Splash of water (about ¼ tsp)
- ¼ tsp ground black pepper
- ½ tsp salt

1. Heat oil in frying pan over medium-high heat until you see slight ripples in the oil. Then add all of the vegetables and mix well. Sauté the vegetables for a few minutes until they soften slightly, being careful that they do not burn (reduce heat if you start to see browning of the vegetables).
2. While the vegetables are cooking add salt and pepper to the eggs, and whisk to combine.
3. When vegetables are cooked to your liking, pour in the eggs and mix with the vegetables.

4. As eggs begin to firm, gently move eggs and vegetables around in pan to fully cook eggs using a spatula or flipper.
5. Continue cooking until eggs are thickened.

Suggestions:

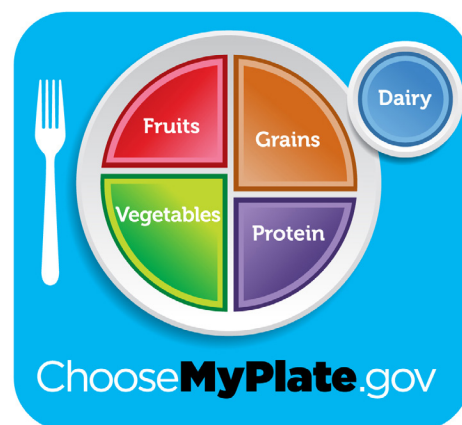
- Use spinach, mushrooms, broccoli or other vegetables instead of (or with) the peppers.
- Add in some chopped fresh herbs if you have any on hand (basil, cilantro, etc.).
- Frozen vegetables can be used, but be sure to sauté them well so water is released before adding the egg mixture.

How does this recipe match MyPlate?

Eggs (protein; purple section); peppers and onions (veggies; green section) – add a side of whole wheat toast (grains; orange section), topped with peanut butter (purple section) and sliced bananas (fruits; red section) to fill out the rest!

5. **Look up and down for savings.** Stores often stock the priciest items at eye level. You can save big by looking at the upper and lower shelves too.
6. **Check for store brands.** Most stores offer their own brand of products that often cost less than name brands.
7. **Grab from the back.** Stores typically stock shelves from back to front, placing the newest items behind the older ones. Reach in the back for the freshest items especially in the produce, dairy and meat aisles.
8. **Ask for a rain check.** If a sale item has run out, ask the store for a rain check. This allows you to pay the sale price after the item is restocked.
9. **Join your store's loyalty program.** Most stores offer a free loyalty program. Get special offers and discounts that non-members do not.

Source: <https://www.choosemyplate.gov/eathealthy/budget/budget-save-more> (accessed August 12, 2020)





CREATE A GROCERY GAME PLAN

WEEKLY CALENDAR

	SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
BREAKFAST							
LUNCH							
DINNER							
SNACKS							

NOTES:



CREATE A GROCERY GAME PLAN

GROCERY LIST

FRUITS

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GRAINS (BREADS, PASTAS, RICE, CEREALS)

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DAIRY (MILK, YOGURT, CHEESE)

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VEGETABLES

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PROTEIN FOODS (MEAT, SEAFOOD, BEANS & PEAS, NUTS, EGGS)

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OTHER

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NOTES:
