



7 Habits of Highly Effective Shoppers

Dinnertime doesn't need to be a sprint from work to the supermarket and home every night – not with a bit of planning. Planning gets a bad rap as boring or too time-consuming. But good food habits can quickly become routine, and in the end will pay you back in time saved from consolidating your shopping and from creating better, more economical meals.

Effective Habit 1: Stock Your Kitchen with Staples

A “staple” is whatever you need to make the kind of food you like to cook. For many people, pasta, pasta sauce, peanut butter, and canned beans and tuna are staples. For others, soy sauce or anchovy paste might be must-have foods. With a well-stocked pantry, you can make many of your favorite dishes any day of the week without stopping again at the market.

Habit 2: Space Allowing, Back up Your Key Staples

This boils down to buying and storing one more of each staple if you have space, keeping you from dashing to the market at the last minute for just a single essential ingredient. Try to stock up when the items are on sale. It's like having your own private store at your fingertips!

Habit 3: Keep a Running Grocery List

Tuck a long skinny pad into the front of your silverware drawer, or clip a sheet of paper to the fridge with a magnet, or keep a list in your mobile device, and add things to your grocery list as you run low. Be sure to check out your pantry and fridge before you go to the store—you'll likely find last minute omissions, or get ideas of what to buy to make good use of other foods on hand.



Habit 4: Plan a Week's Worth of Meals

Here's the step most people resist: planning the week's meals. Write the days of the week on a piece of paper, and jot down your dinner plan for each day (keep in mind that it's okay if your plan changes as the week progresses). Many people plan their menus around what's on sale at their local grocery store. At first it might take you a half hour, but you'll pare that down to 10 minutes or so once you get in the habit. (Hot tip: there's nothing wrong with making one plan, then using that same plan every week. Or make two plans and just alternate them, week by week. You're the cook. If someone else wants more variety, let them volunteer to cook!)

Most of the stress of cooking comes from arriving home late, with no clear idea of exactly what to cook for dinner. By creating a dinner plan for the week, you eliminate that stress. You know what you're planning to cook, and you know you'll have all the ingredients on hand. But back to that list. Once you know what you'll be eating for dinner each day, add any additional ingredients to your existing grocery list. Think about lunch, and breakfast, and add any routine ingredients for those meals. Now your list is complete and it's time to go to the store.

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Habit 5: Shop Intentionally

Armed with your list, you should be able to shop fairly quickly. At the start of each aisle, glance down at your list and note which items you'll find in that aisle. (Some people even like to circle or color-code each aisle's items so it's easier to make sure they get them all.) Try to buy only what's on your list, and limit impulse items to a minimum. Resisting impulse items is easier if you don't shop with an empty stomach!

Habit 6: Store Food Thoughtfully

Before you put away your food, clean out anything in the fridge that's on its last legs. Rearrange what's left, and only then put away your new purchases. If you have room, freeze foods that have oil content to avoid rancidity. These include whole wheat and whole grain flours, nuts, and butter. Store olive and other cooking oils in a dark place, and refrigerate cooking vinegars to ensure optimum freshness.



Habit 7: Prep Food Ahead of Time

There's one more step after you return home and unpack your food, and that's prepping fruits and veggies, especially greens. Why? To extend their shelf life, and make it easy to grab healthy foods quickly.

- Cut up a large melon or a pineapple, and refrigerate in a covered container.
- Tear the leaves off your head of lettuce, rinse them in cold water, and spin them in a salad spinner. Layer the lettuce leaves in paper towels, and store in a large plastic container or plastic bag. Do the same with chard, kale, collards or any other dark leafy greens or herbs. Instead of rotting in three or four days, they'll keep one to two weeks stored this way, and you can make a quick crispy salad in minutes.
- Slice up peppers, carrots, and celery and put them in a small container, so it's easy to grab a handful.



If you have more money than time, you can buy pre-cut produce, but it's generally much more expensive than prepping your own. Now, let's get cooking!

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