



Savvy Online Grocery Shopping

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We get food from a variety of locations – at grocery stores, convenience stores, discount stores, and restaurants. A quickly growing option for food shopping is the online marketplace. Online grocery shopping has been around since the early 2000s. It has gained momentum with more online options and technology in our everyday lives.

There are two common ways to shop for groceries online. First, you can order items online and have them delivered to your home. The groceries could come from a physical store near your home or from a retailer with no physical store nearby (e.g., Amazon). The second common type of online grocery shopping is placing an order online with a local store and picking it up at their location. Those in rural communities may not have the option to pick up groceries at a store's location.

It is helpful to understand the benefits and barriers of buying groceries online. This publication will explore those as well as provide useful tips to make your grocery shopping less stressful. It may also save you money and time.

Benefits of Online Grocery Shopping

There are many benefits of online grocery shopping. Some benefits may depend on your age, stage of life, or your resources.



Improved Food Access

Having groceries delivered may provide better food access for you and your family. This option allows you to receive nutritious, shelf-stable food without the burden of traveling a long distance. When ordering online, be sure the retailer offers delivery to your location. The amount of time your order will take to arrive at your home will depend on the store you order your food from. Local grocery stores or supermarkets may be able to deliver the same day you order. Buying from large online retailers may take two or more days for items to arrive. Keep this in mind when deciding how soon you need items and what kinds of foods you plan to order.



Convenience

Saving time and energy are the two main reasons some people choose to grocery shop online. For others, delivery options are useful for various ages and stages of life. Health conditions, disabilities, recovery and rehabilitation after a medical procedure, and having young children are just a few examples of when it may be more convenient to take advantage of online grocery shopping delivery or order pickup. This can also save you time you would normally spend in a store. Using online grocery shopping allows you more time to focus on other activities or tasks you may need to prioritize.

Meeting Dietary Needs

Online grocery shopping allows shoppers to search for food items based on dietary needs. This is helpful for people with food allergies, intolerances, sensitivities, or other restrictions for certain health conditions. It may be easier to shop online since you can “search” for specific items and add them to your virtual cart. For example, if you are managing high blood pressure, you could search and select items that are low sodium. When shopping online, the items that meet your dietary needs are only a few clicks away.

Increased Variety and Exposure to New Foods

While scrolling through the store’s website, you may find new foods or foods you cannot regularly

find in your local grocery store. This may give you the chance to try a different food or recipe. If you have children, this may help expose them to new foods and flavors as well. This can be a fun experience for your family.

Reduce Impulse Purchases

People who grocery shop online are more likely to stick to their shopping list and are less likely to toss items into the cart impulsively. This can also prevent children from tossing items in the cart unnoticed, which can add to the final bill. Sticking to a shopping list will help you stay on budget and save money. Online grocery shoppers can see the total of their virtual cart add up in real time, which also prevents overspending. Grocery shoppers in a store may forget if they have an item at home and buy it “just in case” they need it. You can check your cupboard or pantry for an item as you fill your virtual cart.

Barriers to Online Grocery Shopping

While online grocery shopping may have several benefits, there are barriers to consider as well.

Convenience Charges and Delivery Fees

Delivery and service fees often come with online grocery shopping. You can avoid some fees by buying a minimum dollar amount set by the store. This may work well for people and families

who save online grocery shopping for large weekly or monthly orders. On the other hand, some online grocery retailers require a certain number of items or a minimum dollar amount before you can place an order. For example, if you only need three or four items, the online retailer may not allow the order. That would mean you need to make an actual trip to the store or order more items. However, some retailers have membership reward programs with an annual fee that gets rid of any added delivery or pickup charges. There also may be an expectation to tip delivery personnel.

Concerns about Perishable and Frozen Foods

Shoppers may be more hesitant to buy fresh or frozen items because of the delivery time or fear of the items spoiling. This includes fruits, vegetables, dairy items, and meat. If you use both in-store and online shopping methods, buy items that spoil in-store to ensure you can immediately bring them home and put them in the refrigerator or freezer. Buy shelf-stable items, such as canned goods and boxed and packaged items, through online options for delivery or pickup without worry, if they are delivered to a secure location to avoid being stolen from a porch or driveway.

Technology and Internet Access

Online grocery shopping requires technology. You need a computer, tablet, or smartphone as well as an internet connection. This might be challenging in rural areas where it is hard to find reliable internet service. Many online grocery retailers have their own smartphone apps, which require you to download them and set up an online account. This could be challenging for those with limited connectivity.

Lack of Choice and Substitute Options

Some shoppers like to have control when choosing their groceries, especially fresh foods like fruits, vegetables, and meats. With online grocery shopping, someone else is choosing items for you and may not select what you prefer. Also, items you order may be unavailable. Some shoppers are particular about their requests and may not enjoy the alternate item they receive. Some online grocery

retailers will allow you to decide if you would like a similar item as a substitute but it may require an extra step in the ordering process.

Physical and Mental Health

For some, grocery shopping in-store may provide social interactions that benefit mental health. In addition, walking in the grocery store adds steps to the day and may be a routine source of physical activity for some. When shopping online, individuals will not receive these mental and physical health benefits.

Considerations For Your Next Online Shopping Trip

The following considerations might help you decide whether online grocery shopping meets your needs and matches your lifestyle.

Finding Nutrition Information

Retailers typically give an image of the Nutrition Facts label and ingredients list online with the information about an item. This may mean extra clicks or scrolling, but it is often readily available. It may be easier to read nutrition information in a larger font size on a computer rather than on a smartphone or tablet. Keep in mind that in the store you can easily compare product information among several packages at once. Online, it might be hard to directly compare items on the screen at the same time.

Family Bonding and Child Development

For some families, grocery shopping in the store can be a bonding activity. It allows everyone to choose foods, learn about nutrition, and contribute to family food decisions. Grocery shopping in-store also provides an opportunity for children to learn numbers, shapes, sizes, and other skills. For example, a child could be asked to put three oranges into the cart. Exposure to fruits and vegetables in person may increase interest for some children and increase the likelihood of them trying a new item. When grocery shopping online, think about involving all family members of all ages when making the grocery list or filling the virtual shopping cart.

Food Assistance Programs

Many online food retailers accept Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) through Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards as a form of payment. However, before making your order, confirm that EBT payment is accepted by your preferred online grocery retailer and review any policies related to using your benefits. Online retailers that accept SNAP and WIC may use delivery services that encourage tipping. Consider this added cost when grocery shopping online using EBT. Using SNAP or WIC funds for purchases might be different from store to store.

Online Payments

Buying groceries online requires an electronic payment method and entering personal information such as name, contact information, and address over the internet. Make sure you trust the website when sharing this information. Confirm you are shopping on a secure website by looking for “https” in the address bar. Use a credit card when possible and do not save payment information. This helps protect your privacy and adds a step when checking out, so you are more intentional when placing an order.

Useful Tips for Online Grocery Shopping

With a few tips and tricks, the online grocery shopping process may be more enjoyable and cost-effective. Consider the tips below.

- Ask others you know who have used online grocery shopping about their experience.
- Combine an online grocery order with a family member or neighbor to learn about the process or avoid delivery or service fees.
- Expect your first online order to take longer. You will have to set up an account and you need to take your time when searching and selecting foods for the first time.
- If you regularly shop online for groceries with one store, check whether it has a loyalty or rewards program to receive better deals and offers.



- Pay close attention to the amount of an item you are buying online. This is particularly important with fresh fruits and vegetables. For example, you want to be sure you are buying five bananas instead of five bunches of bananas.
- Shelf tags at the store may be easier to see when comparing cost per serving or cost per ounce. Some retailers include this information online and others do not.
- Most online food retailers have a separate smartphone app that connects the weekly deals and current coupons with the online ordering system, which may save you money.
- Review available online weekly sale ads and coupons and add them to your account before placing your order.
- Consider trying online grocery shopping during a particularly busy season of your life. This may save time and energy that you could then focus on other things.
- Double-check whether you are placing your order for pickup at the store or for home delivery. The website will confirm this at checkout. Confirm the order pickup or delivery times to make sure it works with your schedule.

Using online grocery shopping does not have to be the only way you buy groceries, but could be a helpful tool for saving money, choosing nutritious items, and meeting your unique individual and family needs. Consider these factors the next time you think about placing an online grocery order.

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