



Highlights: Supermarkets

The latest issue of **Washington Consumers' CHECKBOOK** magazine, available at www.checkbook.org, compares local supermarkets for price and quality, evaluates membership warehouse stores and other alternatives to conventional supermarkets, and gives tips on how to save on groceries anywhere you shop.

Comparing supermarkets for price and quality

CHECKBOOK compared prices at local supermarkets using an apples-to-apples market basket of 152 items, and compared quality based on surveys of CHECKBOOK and *Consumer Reports* subscribers. Highlights include:

- Wegmans once again wowed with very high customer ratings for quality and low prices. The Rochester, NY-based chain operates 10 area locations with more in the works and ranks No. 1 for quality among CHECKBOOK's raters (an astounding 94 percent rated it "superior" overall). CHECKBOOK found its prices to be 11 percent lower than average prices at Safeway.
- The area's other price standouts were Walmart, Food Lion, and Super Target. Compared to average prices at Giant and Safeway, prices were substantially lower at both Walmart stores we shopped (17 percent lower and 12 percent lower), Food Lion (nine percent lower), and Super Target (seven percent lower). For a family that spends \$200 per week at the supermarket, a seven to 17 percent price difference could total \$730 to \$1,770 in savings.
- Giant offered lower prices than Safeway, Shoppers Food Warehouse, and Harris Teeter. Among the four chains, Safeway had the highest prices. Giant's prices averaged about seven percent lower than Safeway's, Shopper's Food Warehouse's prices were about five percent lower than Safeway's, and Harris Teeter's were about three percent lower.
- In terms of quality, Food Lion, Giant, Safeway, Shoppers Food Warehouse, Target, and Walmart receive low marks from their customers. Walmart was rated superior overall by only 26 percent of its surveyed customers, Target by only 29 percent, Safeway by 34 percent, Food Lion and Shoppers Food Warehouse each by 38 percent, and Giant by 39 percent. Harris Teeter, on the other hand, continues to receive above-average ratings for quality, receiving "superior" ratings for "overall quality" from 73 percent of its surveyed customers. Harris Teeter also received considerably higher scores than Giant, Safeway, and Shoppers for "quality of fresh produce," "quality of meats," and other survey questions.
- Whole Foods Market and Chevy Chase Supermarket had the highest prices in CHECKBOOK's survey; both had prices about 34 percent higher than the average of prices at Giant and Safeway (keep in mind Whole Foods sells a limited number of comparable items included on the survey). On the other hand, Whole Foods consistently receives high scores for quality of fresh produce and meat, which account for many of the items CHECKBOOK could compare between Whole Foods and other chains.
- Prices at Target and Walmart locations in the District were higher than at their suburban counterparts. Prices at the Walmart store CHECKBOOK surveyed in the District were about six percent higher than at the surveyed suburban store, and Target's DC store offered prices that were about five percent higher than its surveyed suburban store.

Alternatives to the Supermarket—Trader Joe's and Aldi

- Trader Joe's overall ratings on CHECKBOOK's survey of customers were higher than most area stores, yet Trader Joe's generally charges the same prices as Giant and Safeway.
- Aldi's prices were an astounding 45 percent lower than the Giant/Safeway average for CHECKBOOK's full market basket including comparable national-brand items. But these savings come with a downside: Aldi was rated relatively low on many aspects of quality—but not as low as Giant or Safeway for "overall quality."

- Trader Joe's and Aldi both have a much more limited selection of products than traditional supermarkets—only 41 percent of the items in CHECKBOOK's market basket were available at Trader Joe's and only 53 percent at Aldi, so their customers will also have to shop elsewhere.

Buying in Bulk—Warehouse Clubs

- For purchasing certain grocery items, membership warehouse stores offer low-cost alternatives to supermarkets. CHECKBOOK surveyed BJ's, Costco, and Sam's Club. These membership warehouse stores had few if any of the items in CHECKBOOK's market basket in standard sizes. But when the researchers looked for the same brands regardless of size, membership warehouse stores offered a larger portion of the market basket items. BJ's had 74 percent, Sam's Club had 55 percent, and Costco had 45 percent.
- For the items that could be compared, based on unit prices (price per pound, for example), the surveyed membership warehouse stores offered dramatic savings. The surveyed Costco store, for example, beat the Safeway store it was compared to by a whopping 33 percent. And compared to that Safeway store, the savings were about 27 percent at both the surveyed BJ's and Sam's Club stores.
- Most consumers will not be able to do all their shopping at a warehouse store. An option is to buy what you can at a warehouse store and then buy remaining products at a supermarket, purchasing national brands of the cheapest size. Following that method with a Costco store and a Giant store, a shopper could expect to save about 16 percent compared to shopping at Giant alone.

Money-saving tips wherever you shop

- Plan meals and make lists and stick to them. This will help limit impulse buying and multiple shopping trips. Shoppers can make a list of commonly purchased items in the order they come to them in the aisles, then print copies or save it in a smart phone. Mark up the list before each supermarket trip.
- Don't shop while hungry.
- Keep track of wasted food and adjust quantities purchased on future trips.
- Shop specials. If an item is priced exceptionally well, buy in quantity.
- Consider substituting store brand or generics for national brands. When CHECKBOOK allowed the substitution of cheaper generic and store brands for about one-sixth of the items in its price-shopping market basket at Giant and Safeway, the total cost for the basket dropped by about five percent.
- Go online for coupons. Most manufacturers have printable coupons on their websites, and shoppers can get even more from sites such as SmartSource.com, Coupons.com, or RedPlum.com. Some stores allow you to add coupons onto your store loyalty card via store websites and apps.
- Buy inexpensive cuts of meat and learn ways to cook them. Or eat less meat to save money.
- Avoid stores' spending traps. It's no coincidence that impulse items are located at the ends of the aisles and dairy items are often located in the rear of the store. Stores know the more items you pass en route to what you need, the more likely you are to pick up items you didn't intend to get.
- Eat what's in season. Savings change with growing seasons. Also compare the price of fresh produce to frozen or canned.
- Compare weights when selecting item-priced produce. One head of lettuce may be significantly larger than another yet cost the same.
- Don't pay for small conveniences. Slicing your own cheese and chopping vegetables saves money.
- If the least expensive stores are not convenient for every week's shopping, keep them in mind for times when you will be going by them anyway.

The media may draw freely on the information on supermarkets in the new issue of Washington Consumers' CHECKBOOK magazine and at www.checkbook.org. CHECKBOOK's editors are available for interviews. Please contact Jamie Lettis at 202-454-3006 or jlettis@checkbook.org to schedule.