

# Department of Family and Consumer Sciences

---

## LOAD UP YOUR DIGITAL GROCERY CART

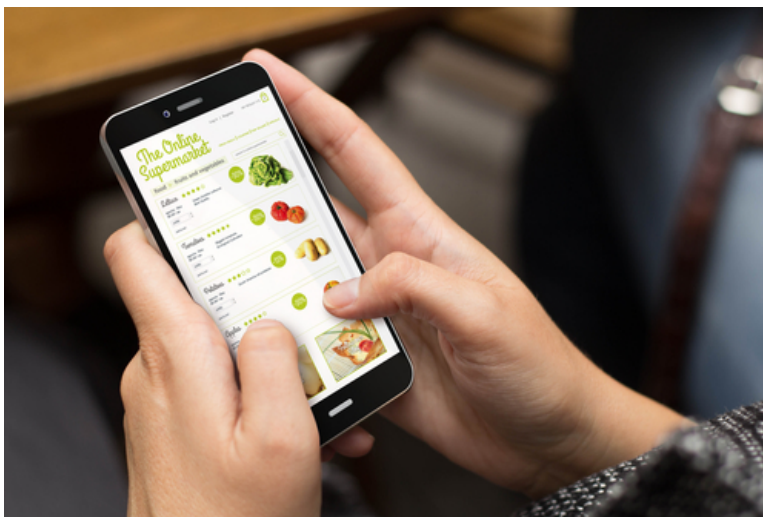
October 2020

Kristen Johnson, Ph.D., RDN, Assistant Professor and Nutrition Specialist

Ann Berry, Ph.D., Professor and Consumer Economics Specialist

Shopping for food online offers a convenient and time-saving method to shop for food. Shopping for groceries online has become increasingly popular. A survey of adult consumers in the United States found that 52 percent purchased groceries online during the past 12 months, which is more than double the number of adults who reported shopping for groceries online in 2018 (Supermarket News 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, consumers have used online food shopping as a strategy to minimize exposure to the COVID-19 virus. In fact, a survey of adults living in the United States revealed that 24 percent reported that they had shopped for groceries online as a strategy to feel comfortable with the safety of their food (IFIC 2020).

In addition to minimizing exposure, shopping for groceries online can offer convenience, saving both time and money. Frequent trips to the grocery for little things can add up!



### Compare Services

There are many options available today for purchasing foods online. Some retailers offer online shopping services that allow you to place an order on their website or app to be picked up at a designated time and store location. Other retailers offer a subscription service that allows you to purchase food items from multiple food retailers. Delivery options may also be available, depending on the retailer and your location. Research the options available in your area and the services each retailer provides to decide what works best for you and your family. While comparing services, consider the following:

- **Fees:** Determine if the retailer charges subscription fees, delivery fees and/or service fees.
- **Minimum Order Requirements:** Many retailers have a minimum order requirement for pick-up or delivery service.

- **Substitution Policies:** Most companies have policies about item substitutions if the original item you ordered is out of stock. Check to see how each store handles item substitutions. Some of the questions to research include:
  - Are you able to choose which items you would like to be substituted?
  - Will you be notified if items are out of stock and if items have been substituted?
  - Will you be able to review your substituted and out of stock items? If so, how far in advance are you able to review substitutions?
  - Will you be able to choose whether you want to keep substituted items?
  - Will the store honor the original price if the items that are substituted are more expensive than the original items you ordered?
- **Price:** Is the price for food items the same, or similar, to what you would pay if you were purchasing the items in the store?
- **Time Frame:** How far in advance are you able to place an order for store pick-up or delivery? How far in advance of pick-up or delivery can you edit your order to add or remove items?
- **Personalization:** Does the retailer allow you to leave messages for the employees who are fulfilling your order? Does the retailer's website or app allow you to designate your favorite items to make shopping easier and quicker over time? Does the retailer allow you to make a shopping list for the items you need to purchase?
- **Payment options:** Research the payment options available from each retailer. Can you use debit cards, credit cards and/or EBT cards? Do you have to pay online, or can you pay when you pick up your order?
- **Produce and Perishable Foods:** Does the retailer allow you to check the quality of your produce and other perishable items during pick-up or delivery?
- **Coupons:** Does the retailer offer online coupons or accept paper coupons?
- **Nutrition Information:** Can you view the nutrition facts label and ingredients list for food items on the retailer's website or mobile app to help you make healthy food choices?

### Tips for Transitioning to Online Shopping

- Pay attention to the unit when ordering food items like produce and deli meats. For example, are you ordering two bananas or two pounds of bananas? Can you order a ½ pound of deli meat or can you only order in 1-pound increments?
- Keep in mind that the final price of some products, like meats or produce, may depend on their weight.
- Since you will not be able to see food packages on the store shelf, pay attention to the size of food packages to make sure you are ordering the right package size for your needs.
- Keep in mind that while shopping for groceries online, the process of meal planning and preparing a grocery list may feel differently than when shopping for foods in-person. You may choose to gradually add to your shopping list or shopping cart over time as you choose your family's meals for the upcoming weeks. If you have a smart phone or tablet, you can add items to your shopping list or shopping cart at the same time you are checking your pantry, refrigerator or freezer to determine the items you need to purchase.

## Shopping for Foods Online

- Shopping for food online means that you won't be browsing the aisles of the store. This may mean that you won't be reminded to purchase certain items as you see them inside the store. This also means that you might not be as tempted to make impulse purchases!

### Maximizing Your Food Dollars

- Budget how much you will spend on groceries for the month. Since some retailers have a minimum order, try not to make numerous orders during the month.
- Remember to check if the retailer accepts coupons for online purchases and keep this in mind when planning your order and budgeting your food dollars.
- Watch out for marketing tactics that encourage you to make impulse purchases online. Some retailers organize their online websites to entice you to purchase items you may not have on your original list. For example, there may be a promotion for S'mores Day coming up. Were you planning on having s'mores this week and were chocolate bars, marshmallows and graham crackers already on your list? While some of the website organization and marketing topics may help you with your food budget and meal planning, such as a section of the website or app to help you plan Easy Family Meals, some may help to bust your budget.

### Using SNAP Benefits

Beginning in June 2020, Tennesseans can use SNAP benefits, formerly known as food stamps, to purchase foods online. At the time of this writing, SNAP recipients can use SNAP benefits for online food purchases at two retailers, Amazon and Walmart. SNAP benefits can be used to purchase food items, including fruits and vegetables; meat, poultry and fish; dairy products; breads and cereals; snack foods and non-alcoholic beverages and seeds and plants that produce foods for consumption. SNAP benefits cannot be used to pay for service or delivery fees associated with online food purchases. While University of Tennessee Extension does not recommend one food retailer more than another, information about using SNAP benefits to purchase foods online at these retailers is included below.

**Amazon:** In order to shop, users must register for an Amazon user account and register their EBT card. Foods can be purchased through Amazon Grocery, Amazon Pantry and Amazon Fresh (only available in certain areas). Although shipping fees cannot be paid with SNAP benefits, shipping fees may be waived if a minimum purchase amount is met. To learn more about purchasing groceries online at Amazon, visit [tinyurl.com/y2dzf2ak](https://tinyurl.com/y2dzf2ak).

**Walmart:** Foods can be purchased through Walmart Pickup and Delivery on the store website or mobile app. During checkout, select "EBT" as a payment option. If you purchase items that are not eligible for purchase with SNAP benefits and if your total amount is more than the amount of EBT funds, the retailer will accept other forms of payment. Research your local stores to determine what services are offered in your area. To learn more about purchasing groceries online at Walmart, visit [tinyurl.com/y83x5zde](https://tinyurl.com/y83x5zde).

### **Food Safety**

Foods that are purchased online, through store pickup or delivery, should be handled safely so that foods remain safe to eat and do not cause illness. Follow these steps to keep foods safe to eat.

- Make store pickup your last stop before going home. Perishable foods should be refrigerated or frozen within two hours (within one hour when temperatures are above 90 F inside your vehicle). Bacteria that cause foodborne illness multiply rapidly when the temperature of food is in the “danger zone” of 40-140 F.
- Check to be sure that raw meat, poultry, seafood and eggs are kept separate from foods that will not be cooked such as fruit, salads and deli items. If these foods or their juices have leaked onto ready-to-eat foods, contact your retailer for a refund or replacement.
- Pack a cooler with ice or bring insulated bags or containers to keep hot items hot and cold items cold while traveling, especially if you live a long distance from the store.

#### *Food Safety for Food Deliveries:*

- Research each company’s food safety standards. Ask how the company will respond if foods are delivered to your home that are not at a safe temperature.
- Make sure that the company will deliver perishable items in insulated materials with dry ice and/or frozen gel packs.
- Arrange for food to be delivered when someone is at home so that it can be refrigerated or frozen quickly. If no one can be home when your food is delivered, coordinate a safe spot for the delivery driver to leave your food. Find a place that is cool, shaded and free from pests and rodents.
- When your food items arrive at your house, quickly inspect items. Make sure that cold items are 40 F or below. Refrigerate or freeze perishable items as quickly as possible. Make sure hot foods are 140 F or hotter. If a perishable food item is delivered at a temperature between 40 F and 140, notify the company and do not eat the food.

### **Federal Trade Commission Tips for Online Shopping**

- Know the retailer. Confirm the retailer’s physical address and phone number in case you have questions or problems.
- Know what you are buying. Read the description of the product closely.
- Know what it will cost. Factor delivery charges, service fees, minimum purchase amounts and, if applicable, shipping and handling fees.
- Check out refund policies.
- Pay by credit card. If you pay by credit or charge card online, your purchase will be protected by the Fair Credit Billing Act. In the event that someone uses your credit card number without your permission, your liability is limited to the first \$50 in charges. If you use your debit card, you do not have this protection.
- Keep records. Print or save records of your online shopping transactions, like receipts and emails. Check your credit card statements as you receive them and check for charges you don’t recognize.

## Shopping for Foods Online

- Protect your information. Don't email any financial information. If you need to provide financial information through the company's website, look for indicators that the site is secure, like a URL that begins https.
- Check the privacy policy. You should know what personal information the website operators are collecting, why and how they will use the information.

### Summary of Pros and Cons

Shopping for food online, whether for home delivery or store pickup, can be a convenience for many individuals and families. If you find a retailer that meets your needs, with both products and services, you can save time and money on your food purchases. However, some retailers may charge fees or require minimum purchases that could offset your potential savings. Do your research before you start shopping, comparing retailers where you normally shop in person as well as researching food retailers you have not shopped with before. You may be surprised at the options you will find!

### Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Madelyn Howe and Rebecca Green, University of Tennessee Department of Nutrition graduate students, for their assistance with this publication and Janie Burney, professor and nutrition and food safety specialist, and Chris Sneed, assistant professor and consumer economics specialist, for their review of this publication.

### References

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2020). *Tips for meal kit and food delivery safety*. <https://www.cdc.gov/foodsafety/communication/food-safety-meal-kits.html>

Federal Trade Commission (2011). *Shopping Online*. <https://www.consumer.ftc.gov/articles/0020-shopping-online>

International Food Information Council (IFIC). (2020). *COVID-19 May 2020: A second look at COVID-19's impact on food purchasing, eating behaviors, and perceptions of food safety*. <https://foodinsight.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/IFIC-COVID-19-May-2020.pdf>

Russell Redman, (2020, May 11). *Online grocery sales to grow 40% in 2020*. Supermarket News. <https://www.supermarketnews.com/online-retail/online-grocery-sales-grow-40-2020>

Tennessee Department of Human Services. (n.d.). *Supplemental nutrition assistance program (SNAP)*. <https://www.tn.gov/humanservices/for-families/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap.html>

United States Department of Agriculture. (2013). *What can SNAP buy?* <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/eligible-food-items>



**[UTIA.TENNESSEE.EDU](http://UTIA.TENNESSEE.EDU)**

Programs in agriculture and natural resources, 4-H youth development, family and consumer sciences, and resource development. University of Tennessee Institute of Agriculture, U.S. Department of Agriculture and county governments cooperating. UT Extension provides equal opportunities in programs and employment.