



NEWS RELEASE

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Six easy ways to stretch your food budget

By Kay Blakley
DeCA home economist

FORT LEE, Va. – The Military Saves campaign encourages service members and their families to develop financial fitness habits that lead to personal financial stability, and ultimately, to mission readiness. To help attain those goals, there’s hardly a better habit to embrace than choosing the commissary for all your grocery and household needs. After all, “Extending the paychecks of military members with savings of 30-percent or more is the reason the commissary benefit exists,” said DeCA Director and Chief Executive Officer Philip E. Sakowitz Jr. So, it should come as no surprise that No. 1 on our list of six easy ways for military families to stretch their food budget is *shop the commissary!*

1. Shop the commissary: We may look like a retail grocery store, but we’re actually a government agency charged with delivering a non-pay benefit for military members and their families. Commissaries make no profit – you pay the same price DeCA pays for products, plus the 5-percent surcharge, which goes directly to funding the new construction or renovation of commissaries.

Government agencies aren’t allowed to advertise, so you won’t have a splashy grocery circular screaming daily specials at you each time you walk through the door. Instead, take note of the red, white and blue “Savings You’ve Earned” shelf signs, or visit the Savings Aisle at <http://www.commissaries.com> to view prices and percent savings of specific sale items in the store where you shop.

Consistently shopping the commissary provides an average savings of more than 30-

percent over retail grocery store prices. We know this from database comparisons of commissary prices versus retail grocery prices, plus recurring typical market basket surveys. But do your own comparisons and see the proof for yourself.

2. Plan ahead: Sound meal planning and eating more meals at home will go a long way toward reducing your overall food expenditures. Don't forget to include leftovers in your plan. A large, inexpensive roast served on Sunday can provide the makings for sandwiches on Monday and a protein source in a chef salad served on Tuesday.

3. Make a list: Having a definite list when you shop helps avoid impulse buys. If you find an item on sale that you know you'll use later, feel free to add it to your cart. But beware of pretty displays that don't fit into your plan, and never shop when you're tired or hungry. You'll fill your cart with all kind of items – everything looks good when you're starving and trying to hurry.

4. Read labels and compare prices: When comparing prices of competing brands, compare the number of servings per container. A cheaper price on a larger size is only a savings if you actually use those extra ounces. It's no bargain if you end up throwing them away. Don't automatically assume that a larger-size container is always a better buy. Sometimes it is, but often it's not. Always check the unit price shelf tag, or do the math yourself. Sometimes huge savings can also be found by comparing the same product in different forms.

For example, at my local commissary's prices today, a half-cup serving of oatmeal from an 18-ounce box of quick-cooking oats costs 7 cents, but from a box of 12 single-serving packets it costs 26 cents. Serving size and microwave cooking instructions are exactly the same. The price of a 12-ounce package of smoked ham in the cold cuts section worked out to be \$4.61 per pound. The same product, from a competing brand, was available in the deli section for less than half that price – \$2.17 per pound. Plus, I could have it custom sliced to my satisfaction and purchase exactly the number of ounces I needed.

5. Do it yourself: The higher price for "convenience" items reflects the labor required to pre-cook, pre-cut, or pre-measure. Most of the time, substantial savings can be had by making these preparations yourself. Coleslaw is on my menu for dinner tonight, so I compared the difference between buying a head of cabbage (22 cents per pound) and shredding it myself versus buying a 1-pound bag of coleslaw mix (\$1.99). What a huge difference! I can easily spend a few minutes with my food processor for that kind of savings. Keep your math skills sharp and your calculator close at hand as you shop, because occasionally, you'll be surprised. Shredded cheddar cheese, another item on my shopping list today, was exactly the same price per pound

whether shredded or in a 1-pound block. In that case, I'll take the shredded version and save myself the extra effort at home.

6. Redeem coupons: Coupons and rebate savings can add up fast. All commissaries honor Internet coupons these days, and most commissaries make paper coupons available near the store entrance, in the checkout area or sometimes attached to the products themselves. Keep an eye out for those you use most often. And remember, coupons redeemed in overseas commissaries are good six months past their stateside expiration date.

Savings through consistent shopping in commissaries year round can also add up fast. Yearly savings for a family of four averages \$3,400, a family of three saves more than \$2,600, a couple more than \$2,100 and a single service member saves nearly \$1,200. With savings like those you'll be financially fit and mission ready in no time.

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About DeCA: *The Defense Commissary Agency operates a worldwide chain of commissaries providing groceries to military personnel, retirees and their families in a safe and secure shopping environment. Authorized patrons purchase items at cost plus a 5-percent surcharge, which covers the costs of building new commissaries and modernizing existing ones. Shoppers save an average of more than 30 percent on their purchases compared to commercial prices – savings worth about \$3,400 annually for a family of four. A core military family support element, and a valued part of military pay and benefits, commissaries contribute to family readiness, enhance the quality of life for America's military and their families, and help recruit and retain the best and brightest men and women to serve their country.*