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HOW TO SHOP IN A NATURAL FOODS STORE

Use These Four Tips to Make the Most of Your Shopping Trip

By Maryann Hammers



Health food stores are like supermarkets wearing Birkenstocks: Even the most upscale ones still exude a down-to-earth feel and a shared sense of values--natural, healthy and organic are a given. But if you're relatively new to these stores, the first thing you may notice is an intriguing array of unfamiliar brands and products. It's all interesting and fun--but it can be a little overwhelming too. Use these four steps to navigate the shelves and explore uncharted territory.

Make a list: Write down what you would buy in a traditional market, and then ask the salesperson for healthier alternatives. "They do exist," says Cheryl Dicks, owner of Healthway Natural Foods in Washington, DC. "For example, if you normally buy frosted cornflakes, try whole grain frosted cereals sweetened with honey." Look for other healthy basics, such as organic quick brown rice and antibiotic-free meats.

"Of course, it's OK to veer from your list, too," says registered dietitian Suzanne Havala Hobbs, author of *The Natural Kitchen: The Beginner's Guide to Buying and Using Natural Foods and Products*. "Take 10 minutes to peruse the aisles, and consider buying an item or two that you've never tried. You'll hit a dud now and then, but you'll also discover new favorites."

Be supplement-savvy: How to choose among the hundreds of vitamins, minerals and herbs? Should you reach for a "women's formula" or an "antioxidant blend" multivitamin? "Do some homework first," says Judy Simon, RD, clinic dietitian at the University of Washington Medical Center in Seattle. "Determine why you want to take the supplement, which form is best--calcium carbonate versus calcium citrate, for example--and check for possible interactions if you take any medications." Ask store owners or managers for shopping guidance too. They're usually passionate and knowledgeable about the products they carry.

Go with the grains: Bins of grains, beans and nuts look inviting and eliminate wasteful packaging, plus they let you buy just the amount you need. The best bin designs are self-dispensing models--the kind that require you to open some type of funnel or hatch that lets the product flow into a container. These closed bins help keep bacteria out and freshness in. They should be labeled, dated and at least 6 inches off the floor.

Know your meatless "meats": Vegetarian hot dogs, sausages, burgers and other meatless "meats" are good protein sources, since many are soy-based. Ideally a serving should contain at least 14 grams of protein. "As a frame of reference, a standard 3-ounce chicken breast has about 21 grams of protein," says Molly Kimball, RD, a sports and lifestyle nutritionist with the Ochsner Clinic Foundation in Louisiana. So if you're replacing chicken in, say, a casserole, aim to replace it with about the same amount of soy protein.



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