

# Grocery shopping tips for the age of coronavirus

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With panic buying affecting grocery stores throughout the country, we

spoke with Zach Conrad, assistant professor in the Department of Kinesiology & Health Sciences at William & Mary, to discuss ways to food shop effectively.

**Thanks for speaking with us. It's a hectic time for everyone, so we appreciate it. I'd like to get your take on what's going on in grocery stores right now. Are we in a food crisis or are people overreacting?**

People are concerned that there's not going to be enough food to go around during this pandemic. However, there's plenty of food—in fact, there's the same amount of food as there was before the pandemic.

We're not seeing that food in the [grocery stores](#) now because people are buying it up in such massive quantities that it's putting some strain on our food chain infrastructure.

Put more simply, we don't have enough trucks and enough labor to get this food from storage facilities to supermarkets in the amounts that people are currently demanding.

This is an issue of supply chain logistics, not supply. If you go into the store and see that there's not enough chicken, it's not because there's not enough supply. It's because there wasn't enough labor and infrastructure to move massive amounts of chicken to retail locations in such a short amount of time.

You can think about it this way: the storage is essentially being shifted from wholesale storage facilities to people's individual freezers in their homes. There's still the same amount of food in the system.

**You mentioned you were at the grocery store this**

## **morning. What stood out?**

There were a few things that I noticed. One was that the display case for cow's milk was bare, which is not too surprising given that this is a staple food for most households. I've seen some recommendations online for people to freeze their milk. It's fine to freeze just almost anything under the right conditions, but people are going to be really disappointed when they defrost that milk, since it separates and gets kind of chunky. It's just not the consistency you would want to drink.

## **Got it. Don't freeze milk.**

Well, that depends on how you want to use that milk. Let's say you want to use it in a baking recipe. That should be fine, since you won't notice the consistency that much. Now, if you're expecting to have it in your cereal, it's not going to be the same consistency as it was before you froze it. A better option is to buy cream, which will last longer, or you could try plant-based alternatives, which have a similar nutritional profile and much longer shelf life.

## **What else did you notice while shopping?**

I see people buying a lot of perishable fruit. The most commonly consumed fruit in the U.S. throughout all seasons are bananas, oranges, apples and grapes. It's one thing to buy a lot of bananas, but you're gonna have to find a way to store those. Peeled bananas freeze really well, but they don't thaw well at all, so you'll be making a lot of smoothies or banana bread—and if you do, please send me some.

You seem to know a lot about how foods taste after they're frozen.

Full disclosure: I have frozen just about every type of food you can

imagine. It's taken me a lot of trial and error to figure out which foods work well after being defrosted.

## **Care to enlighten us?**

Foods like carrots, peas, and corn defrost pretty well, especially if you're adding them to prepared dishes. On the other hand, defrosted broccoli is disappointing. It gets soft and mushy, and loses its crunch. But its nutritional quality isn't reduced, so defrosted broccoli can be pureed into a thick soup, and add some cheese, onions, and garlic for a really great meal.

But there's a point I want to make about this. Behind all this food hoarding and mass purchasing are people who probably don't have too much experience preparing food for long-term storage. There is a lot of work that goes into safely storing large amounts of food so that they're ready to be defrosted, prepared, and consumed. A good option is to buy pre-frozen and canned goods, because this can reduce your time and labor commitment, and can help reduce waste.

## **That's a good segue into my next question. What should people be buying right now?**

There are some great options for foods that will last. First, frozen and canned fruits and vegetables can be great alternatives to fresh varieties. But people should be mindful to choose items that have limited amounts of sodium and added sugar. Those are used as preservatives, especially in canned goods. Make sure you read the label, since there are now many great options that are low in sodium and added sugar.

Also, as people are purchasing a greater volume of food, there is a greater need to ensure food safety. So, make sure to separate your raw

meat items from your other [food](#) items, clean your hands regularly, cook thoroughly, and refrigerate leftovers.

When you're shopping, there are probably going to be lines. If you know you are going to be in line for an hour, be strategic about how you navigate the store. Pick up the highly perishable items last, so they will still be cold by the time you get them home. And, of course, follow the CDC's guidelines about social distancing.

## **Anything else people should keep in mind?**

I would add that for people who have time, the interest and the right kitchen resources, this is a really unique opportunity to expand the types of ingredients we typically use for our recipes in our foods.

Here's one example from the other day. I went to the store looking specifically for onions for a dish I wanted to make. There were no onions, but there were shallots, which are essentially onions that are much smaller. I just decided to go for it. I bought the shallots and you know what? It turned out great. This is a time to experiment with new ingredients and expand our palates.

Provided by The College of William & Mary

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