

Shopping Without the Overwhelm

A low-demand guide for food shopping

Food shopping can involve hundreds of small demands: noticing what has run out, planning meals, remembering safe brands, travelling, managing noise and crowds, comparing prices, checking labels, making substitutions and then putting everything away. When capacity is low, this is not “just shopping”. It is a chain of executive, sensory, physical and emotional tasks.

The aim is not the perfect shop. The aim is enough manageable food, obtained with the least pressure that is realistically available.

Where the overwhelm can build

Demand	What it may feel like	A lower-demand adjustment
Decisions	Every aisle creates another choice.	Use a short repeat list and familiar brands.
Sensory load	Lights, music, smells, people and trolley noise compete for attention.	Choose a quieter time, smaller shop, headphones or delivery.
Working memory	The list, budget and route disappear under pressure.	Group the list by location and use pictures or tick boxes.
Uncertainty	A missing product or changed packet can stop the plan.	Name an acceptable substitute or a no-substitution rule in advance.
Physical capacity	Travel, standing, carrying and unpacking use limited energy.	Use smaller shops, delivery, collection or another person's support.
Food anxiety	Pressure to buy “better” foods can make safe foods harder to choose.	Start with reliably eaten food. Nutrition cannot help if food is inaccessible.

Begin with anchors, not meals

An anchor is one item that makes eating more likely: a safe breakfast, a familiar snack, a tolerated drink, a freezer back-up or the base of several simple combinations. Check anchors first. A shopping list can be complete without becoming a seven-day menu.

Anchor group	Prompt	Examples to personalise
Safe / accepted	What is usually manageable even when capacity drops?	Familiar brand, flavour, texture, portion or presentation.
Easy energy	What needs no cooking or one short step?	Ready-to-eat, microwave or assembly foods that suit you.
Drink	What helps hydration remain visible and accessible?	Your tolerated drinks in usable sizes.
Back-up	What can wait for a difficult day?	Shelf-stable or frozen options you will genuinely use.
Household essential	What would create an extra problem if it ran out?	Only the essentials relevant to this trip.

Three list sizes

Capacity	List purpose	Permission
Minimum	Safe foods, drinks and one immediate option.	Stop after the essentials.
Usual	Anchors plus several flexible components.	Repeat what works; variety is optional.
More capacity	Usual list plus restocking or one new possibility.	Do not let the extra item replace the safe route.

ARFID and sensory needs are part of the plan

A food may only be accessible in a particular brand, packet, temperature, colour, shape or texture. This is relevant information, not fussiness. Photograph the correct item, keep packaging until the replacement arrives, and specify whether substitutions are acceptable. When allergies, intolerances or medical diets apply, check current ingredients and cross-contamination information every time; familiar packaging is not a guarantee that a recipe is unchanged.

Maggie’s reflection

A successful shop is not measured by how much you bought or how balanced the trolley looks. It is measured by whether the food is accessible when you need it. Buying the familiar option can be a thoughtful act of support.

Choose the route with the lowest total demand

In-store, collection, delivery or shared support

The cheapest price is not always the lowest cost to your nervous system, time or energy. Choose the route that leaves enough capacity to receive, unpack and eat the food.

Route	May help when	Watch for
Small local shop	A short list and predictable layout matter most.	Higher prices, fewer brands or limited allergy choices.
Larger supermarket	Range, price or specific products are needed.	Noise, distance, queues and decision fatigue.
Click and collect	Online choosing is manageable but delivery is not suitable.	Substitutions, collection windows and carrying.
Home delivery	Travel, crowds or carrying are the main barriers.	Minimum spend, fees, substitutions and unpacking energy.
Supported shop	Another person can drive, locate items, queue or communicate.	Agree the role beforehand so help does not add pressure.

The ten-minute preparation

Step	Action	Keep it small
1. Check anchors	Look only at the safe-food, drink and back-up locations.	Do not inventory the whole kitchen.
2. Pick list size	Minimum, usual or more-capacity.	Match today, not the person you think you should be.
3. Pick route	Store, collection, delivery or support.	Include travel and unpacking in the decision.
4. Set substitutions	Yes, named alternative only, or no substitute.	Photograph exact products where needed.
5. Protect recovery	Plan food, drink and quiet time before/after.	Do not begin already hungry if this increases distress.

A list that follows the shop

Arrange items in the order you will meet them: entrance essentials, chilled, frozen, shelf items, household, checkout. For online shopping, save a favourites list but check that products, ingredients and pack sizes have not changed. Put the most important items first so a shortened shop can still succeed.

The one-change rule

If you want to try something new, change one variable at a time: brand, flavour, texture, cooking method or portion—not all of them together. Keep the familiar option available. Trying is information, not a commitment to finish, like or buy the item again.

When the planned item is missing

Pause	Decision
Is there an exact product elsewhere?	Check only if the extra search is manageable.
Is a named alternative already approved?	Use it; do not improvise under pressure.
Would any substitute make the meal inaccessible?	Choose no substitute and use the back-up route.
Has the label or packaging changed?	Recheck ingredients, allergens and preparation instructions.
Is capacity dropping?	Finish with essentials, leave, ask for help or abandon the shop safely.

Reduce checkout and unpacking demand

Before checkout	After arriving home
Use the most accessible queue or checkout. Keep payment ready. Ask a supporter to manage scanning, packing or communication.	Put chilled and frozen food away first. Leave safe shelf-stable items together for later if appropriate. Sit down between stages.
Group fragile, frozen and immediate foods separately when possible.	Use one visible "eat first" area. Keep safe-food placement predictable.

A low-demand plan can include stopping

Leaving without every item is allowed. A partially completed shop plus a safe back-up can be more useful than pushing through overload and losing the ability to prepare or eat. If shopping repeatedly prevents adequate intake, hydration or medical nutrition, seek appropriate practical and clinical support.

My low-demand shopping sheet

A printable plan for before, during and after

Today my capacity is	■ Minimum ■ Usual ■ More capacity
My shopping route is	■ Store ■ Collection ■ Delivery ■ Supported
My stopping point is	_____
The person who can help is	_____

My anchors first

Group	Exact item / brand / picture cue	Substitution rule	Got it
Safe food	_____	_____	___
Easy food	_____	_____	___
Drink	_____	_____	___
Back-up	_____	_____	___

Flexible list

Now / essential	Soon / helpful	Only if capacity remains
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Sensory and access plan

Possible pressure	My adjustment
Light / noise / crowds	_____
Travel / walking / carrying	_____
Decisions / changed products	_____
Queue / communication	_____
Unpacking / recovery	_____

My “good enough” shop check-in

Question	Answer
Do I have something I can eat today?	■ Yes ■ Need support
Do I have a tolerated drink?	■ Yes ■ Need support
Do I have one back-up for lower capacity?	■ Yes ■ Need support
Can the rest wait?	■ Yes ■ Ask for help ■ Arrange another route

Useful tools

Goblin Tools: break “food shopping” into smaller tasks and adjust the level of detail. **Phone tools:** photograph exact packets, save a repeat list, use reminders and share a live list with a supporter. **Retailer tools:** favourites, repeat orders, collection and delivery can reduce linked steps, but always recheck product details and substitutions.

Safety and clinical note

Check ingredients, allergens and cross-contamination information every time, including familiar products. Follow storage, chilled/frozen transport and manufacturer instructions. This guide is educational and does not replace individual medical, dietetic, allergy, swallowing or eating-disorder care. Seek qualified help if intake or hydration is limited, health or weight is changing, allergies are suspected, swallowing is difficult, or food restriction and distress are increasingly affecting daily life.

Sources and further reading

Food Standards Agency: food.gov.uk — allergens, labels, storage and food safety. **NHS:** nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well — general nutrition information. **Books:** *The Autism-Friendly Cookbook*, Lydia Wilkins; *Cook As You Are*, Ruby Tandoh; *How to Keep House While Drowning*, KC Davis.

A message from Maggie

Shopping does not have to prove anything about your motivation, independence or health. You are allowed to repeat foods, use delivery, ask someone to come with you, leave early or buy only what keeps eating possible. Make the list fit your real capacity and let “enough” be enough.