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NF97-336 Making Decisions: Buying a Refrigerator

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Making Decisions: Buying a Refrigerator

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It pays to make a good choice when shopping for a refrigerator. A refrigerator may cost more than any other appliance when you buy it, and it can cost more to operate because it must run frequently to keep your food cold or frozen. Plus, a refrigerator gets a lot of use — before and after every meal and between meals.

Here are some questions to ask when shopping for a refrigerator:

Do you want a refrigerator with a top freezer, bottom freezer or side-by-side arrangement? Top freezer refrigerators are most common and usually cost less to operate than side-by-side refrigerator/freezers. Bottom freezers are generally the cheapest to operate, but may be more costly to buy. It can be inconvenient to find food stored in freezers low to the ground, unless you have roll-out or pullout baskets, and they may be harder to locate. When a freezer's door is inside the refrigerator, that freezer space is for short-term frozen storage only (2-3 weeks). If there is a separate freezer door outside the refrigerator compartment, longer storage of frozen items is possible (2-3 months).

How large a refrigerator do you need? A family of four might need at least an 18 cubic foot size, but families who entertain frequently, freeze garden and other fresh produce, or do grocery shopping in quantity may need more refrigerator space. Before you shop, measure the width and height of the space available for the refrigerator. Most refrigerators are about 24 to 36 inches wide and 60 to 84 inches high; side-by-side refrigerators are larger. You should allow at least one inch on each side of the refrigerator for installing and cleaning the refrigerator, as well as door swing. Furthermore, blocking air circulation above, below and around the refrigerator may make it work harder to keep cool. Operating costs depend on size and type.

What defrost system do you want? Manual defrost refrigerators cost less to buy and operate. However, they may not keep ice cream hard or provide longtime storage of frozen food without also freezing foods in the refrigerator compartment. Manual defrost refrigerators are more commonly found in the smaller sizes. Most people prefer a frost-free refrigerator so they will not have the regular chore of defrosting the

freezer portion.

Which special refrigerator features will be most useful to you? Here are a few:

- Automatic ice makers save time and effort. (But consider the quality of your water; an automatic ice maker may not work well with some water mineral content, and may be plugged by hard water.) Some ice makers tend to add to service or repairs needed, and require plumbing.
- Reversible doors are available so that the refrigerator doors open toward a counter when your refrigerator must be placed at the left or right end of your kitchen cabinets, or if you move or remodel your kitchen. Place your refrigerator away from ranges and other heat sources. Avoid unconditioned spaces such as garages or porches and areas where the sun will hit it.
- Cabinet rollers will allow you to roll the refrigerator out for cleaning under it, and help prevent floor cuts and damage.
- Ice and water dispensers let people get ice and chilled water without opening the refrigerator doors. Consider tradeoffs of perhaps higher original cost but lower cost of electricity if ice and ice water are used often.
- Flexible shelving allows you to change shelves when you need to store tall items.
- What type of surface does it have? Is it easy to clean? Do fingerprints show easily or does the surface and/or color hide soils? Are soils easily removed around handles and ice maker?
- Are the inside trays accessible, flexible, slide-out, adjustable for large items, and/or replaceable? Do you need all the racks and mechanisms? Some refrigerators come with horizontal pop storage containers, and/or separate butter, egg, meat, vegetable and fruit storage. Which of these features do you need and use now?
- Storage compartments for meat, vegetables, and fruits may have control knobs to regulate temperature and humidity levels for product storage. A temperature of at least 40°F is needed to insure safe foods.
- Are the inside areas, racks and components easy to clean? Do they come out or slide forward for convenient cleaning and access? Where will spills such as syrup or pop collect? How easily will you be able to clean these up? Glass shelves may be easier to clean than wire, and if they have a raised lip will contain spills.

Look for a high moisture switch (sometimes called an energy saver switch). During humid weather this switch turns on a small heater to prevent "sweat" from forming around your refrigerator door. When not needed during dry weather, turning the switch off can save energy and money.

New refrigerators retain colder temperatures. On hot, humid days, moisture entering the refrigerator/freezer when the door is opened will cause frost to form inside the freezer and moisture to collect inside the refrigerator. To reduce energy use and meet government requirements, defrost heaters have shorter run times.

To control moisture entering the refrigerator or freezer:

- Arrange shelving and food items so air circulates.
- Don't "overload" or "underload" the freezer.
- Set the controls as recommended in the use and care book. Manufacturers may suggest different settings for summer and winter.
- Properly seal liquids and high-moisture foods stored.
- Open the refrigerator and freezer doors as few times as possible.
- Check and maintain the door gaskets. Door seals keep warm, moist air out.

Once you have decided on the refrigerator size and special features you want, you can compare the operating costs of different refrigerator models using the yellow EnergyGuide labels. Look carefully at each EnergyGuide label. A bar across the middle of the label shows the lowest and highest yearly energy costs of all refrigerators of the same size and defrost type. The large number above the bar shows the annual energy cost of the model. It is wise to choose a refrigerator with the lowest operating cost among your choices. Because of U.S. Department of Energy regulations, today's refrigerators use about two-thirds or less of the electricity of models made ten years ago. By the end of 1995, new refrigerants were to replace chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs). The new CFC-free models may use less energy.

Look for comparison studies in books and magazines at your local library or ask at your local Cooperative Extension office. The most energy efficient models have labels showing energy consumption at or near the left hand of the bar range, close to the words "uses least energy."

Refrigerators are being made without Freon, using an alternative refrigerant. Check and ask questions about the type of refrigerant and how it works.

Ask if they will appropriately dispose of your used refrigerator or take it to a place for repair or resale or recycling. Is this a free service?

Refrigerator Information			
Space for refrigerator: Height ____ in. Width ____ in. Depth ____ in.			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Refrigerator make and model			
Refrigerator capacity (cubic feet)			
Refrigerator size (Height/Width/Depth)			
Cost with delivery/pickup			
Cost without delivery/pickup			
Size of freezer unit (Height/Width/Depth)			
Shelves-flexible, adjustable for food types			

Defrost system I want (automatic or manual)			
Energy saver (high energy switch)			
EnergyGuide estimated cost of operation			
Other features I want (list here)			
Other features in each refrigerator model			
Are controls easy to adjust?			
Type of refrigerator coolant			
Take back old refrigerator fee			
Delivery cost or free?			
Service and repair available in the area — travel and/or time cost?			

Other NebFacts in this series include:

- *Making Decisions: Buying a Dishwasher*, NF97-333
- *Making Decisions: Buying a Microwave Oven*, NF97-334
- *Making Decisions: Buying Home Appliances*, NF97-335
- *Making Decisions: Buying a Range*, NF97-337
- *Making Decisions: Household Water Saving Equipment*, NF97-338
- *Making Decisions: EnergyGuides and Major Home Appliances*, NF97-345
- *Making Decisions: Buying a Washing Machine*, NF97-346
- *Making Decisions about Service Contracts and Appliances*, NF97-347
- *Making Decisions: Buying a Clothes Dryer*, NF97-348
- *Handling Wastes: Household Appliances (White Goods)*, NF94-189

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