

Are SNAP Benefits ‘Use it, or lose it’?

Q: Can I lose my SNAP (food stamps) by not using them?

A: The Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) has been sending letters to some SNAP (food stamp) recipients telling them they have unused SNAP benefits they may lose. (SNAP are paid on an Electronic Benefits Transfer or “EBT” card). Here’s some information to help you understand these DTA notices.

Here are some important SNAP rights:

1. You have the *right to save up your SNAP benefits* to do a larger food shop. SNAP helps with immediate food needs—but it is also a “supplemental” nutrition assistance program.

2. If you have made *no food purchases with your EBT card for 6 months in a row*, the state can “store” some of your benefits off-line—but you have not lost them. If you receive a DTA “Off-line” Notice, call or write to your DTA worker and request your SNAP benefits be put back on your EBT card. DTA must restore your benefits within 48 hours of your request. If you used your EBT card for food shopping during the past 6 months, DTA should not be putting your benefits “off-line” at all. Call an advocate if this happens.

3. If you have collected *over 12 months’ worth of un-used EBT benefits* on your EBT account, DTA may take some of these away permanently. DTA must send you a “Notice of Expungement” in advance. But DTA should not take away any SNAP benefits if you have less than 12 months’ worth on your EBT card. If you think DTA wrongly took away your SNAP benefits, you can ask a DTA Supervisor or Office Manager to review this decision. You can also ask for a fair hearing. Legal Services may be able to help with a fair hearing. For information on local Legal Services, go to: <http://www.masslegalservices.org/findlegalaid> or call the Legal Services office nearest you.

Saving up SNAP benefits is not fraud. You have done nothing wrong! Unused SNAP benefits may be a signal that a recipient needs help with food shopping.

Here are some tips to help you:

1. To *check the amount of SNAP* on your EBT card, call the EBT Customer Service number on the back of your EBT card: 1- 800-997-2555.

2. If you *lose your EBT card*, call your DTA worker or visit the nearest DTA office to report a lost card and get a new EBT card. If you *cannot remember your Personal Identification Number (PIN)*, call the EBT Customer Service phone number to “re-PIN” your EBT card at any time.

3. If you *need a ride to a grocery store*, your city or town clerk can give you the number of your Council on Aging (COAs), which may provide a free or reduced fee van services to grocery stores, doctor appointments and other trips. You can also reach your local Aging Services Access Point (ASAP) by calling 1-800-Age-Info, press “1.”

4. If you *need someone to go shopping for you*, anyone in your household can use your EBT card to food shop---even if they are not named on your card. Family members often help SNAP recipients with food shopping. You can ask a neighbor or friend to become your “authorized representative,” and get a *second* EBT card for your same account. If you choose, you have the right to allow your authorized representative to manage your SNAP benefits completely. There is a special “Authorized Representative” DTA form that must be filled out.

5. If you want *help from a homemaker or a personal care attendant (PCA)* to do your food shopping, cooking, or other personal care, you can call an ASAP at 1-800-Age-Info and press “1.”

6. If you have at least \$35/month in unreimbursed health care expenses, you can get an income deduction of \$155/month, which can also increase your housing deduction, which will raise your SNAP benefit. Your DTA office can explain how these deductions work.

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