

A Handy Guide to Family Meals

Submitted by Patricia Nelson, Extension Master Food Volunteer

You're not alone if you'd like to eat more family meals.

According to David Emerson Feit, vice president of the Hartman Group, a research and consulting firm specializing in eating and wellness, "more than two-thirds of parents say they want to eat with their kids every night if they could." If defining a family meal as one that's eaten at home with home-prepared food and with other family members, about 50% of dinners in households with children are family dinners. Approximately 25% of lunches and 33% of breakfasts are also family meals.

There are many obstacles to breaking bread as family, including cooking skills, meal planning skills, conflicting food preferences, and various schedules among family members. And on top of all that, it takes physical and mental energy to figure out what to prepare, for whom and when, and then to actually prepare it, explains Feit.

The Benefits of Eating Together

Though cause and effect aren't clear, the potential benefits to family meals are plenty.

- **Better nutrient intake.** Children and adolescents tend to consume more fruits, vegetables, calcium, iron, and a variety of vitamins when they also have family meals. They're more likely to eat breakfast and consume less soda, unhealthy snacks, fast food, and fried foods. Often, parents eat better if they're partaking in family meals too.
- **Avoidance of some risky behaviors.** According to The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, children who have frequent dinners with their parents are less likely to drink alcohol, smoke or use drugs.
- **Good family relationships.** The same research group at Columbia University finds that teens who dine with parents often are more likely to report having a better relationship with their parents.
- **Better grades and language skills.** Family meals may help young children develop language skills. Kids who rarely eat with parents are more likely to have poor grades.
- **Less disordered eating.** Girls who report eating more family meals in a structured and positive atmosphere are less likely to exhibit disordered eating behaviors.

Overcoming Barriers to Family Meals

A little creativity and reorganization may help you sit down as a family more often.

- **Take shortcuts.** Forget the notion that food has to be made from scratch. Reach for low-sodium canned and frozen foods, and fill in with some prepared foods from your supermarket. Grab a rotisserie chicken, or stop by the seafood counter and ask to have some shrimp steamed.

- **Go for the basics.** No one says that a family dinner has to be more complicated than soup and a sandwich. Or eggs and grits with a side of berries. Aim for a protein-rich food and a couple of other wholesome foods.
- **Think outside the dinner table.** If various schedules keep you apart at dinner time, try a family breakfast or lunch on the weekends.
- **Serve a flexible meal.** To satisfy different food preferences, create a dinner buffet. Allow each family member to customize a pasta bowl or burrito to individual preferences.
- **Start collecting.** Once you and your family have some favorite meals or recipes, keep them in a file for future reference.
- **Lean on time-saving appliances.** Consider using a pressure cooker or a slow cooker. One shortens the cooking time, and the other allows you to prep a meal ahead of time to have it ready when you are.
- **Cook once, eat twice or thrice.** Repurpose your meals in unique ways. For example, eat traditional chili tonight, enjoy it over rice later in the week and use up leftovers in a pasta and cheese bake. Find lunches in that leftover unbaked pasta by creating a veggie-packed pasta salad.

Eating together brings its benefits. So chat with your family or start brainstorming to make it happen. The special time together is worth it!

Source: <https://foodandhealth.com> Jill Weisenberger, MS, RDN, CDE, CHWC, FAND. For more information on nutrition, food safety, health, or family and child development contact the Marais des Cygnes Extension District Paola (913-294-4306) or Mound City (913-795-2829) offices, or write to fmeastwo@ksu.edu or check out our website: www.maraisdescyignes.k-state.edu
