



Eating Together - Eating Well: Making it a Priority

Fact Sheet FS1104



Cooperative Extension

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY HEALTH SCIENCES

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Eating Together... Why is it Important?

For many reasons, today's families are stretched for time and find it difficult to make eating together a priority. After a long workday, parents or guardians may be too tired to prepare a meal. Others have conflicting schedules with meetings and extra curricular activities, and still others are unsure of how to prepare a quick healthy meal.

Despite all of the possible conflicts, eating meals together is more than worth the effort! Recent studies have shown that the children of families who eat together:

- Eat more healthful foods
- Are less likely to be overweight
- Do better in school
- Are less likely to engage in risky behaviors

More than a decade of research by The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) at Columbia University has consistently found that the more often kids eat dinner with their families, the less likely they are to smoke, drink alcohol, or use drugs.

Other Benefits

Family meals help to strengthen families because it is a time for talking and sharing. They encourage a sense of belonging. Family meals help improve family communication. "*What was your favorite part of the day?*" is a question that can start the table talk. Studies show that mealtime conversation around the dinner

table helps increase a child's vocabulary and this leads to better readers. Better readers do better in all school subjects.

Mealtime is a perfect time for children to learn social skills, manners, and how to have pleasant conversations. Parents need to set a good example. Use the family meal time to teach children to take turns and be good listeners.

Eating Together, Eating Well

Children learn how and what to eat by watching others. At meal time, parents and others can model healthy eating. When families eat together, families eat better. Family meals have been shown to promote healthful food choices.

For example, several studies show that eating together promotes regular eating habits in children, and promotes a healthy weight in young children. In a large national study it was found that 4 - 9 year old children were less likely to be overweight when they ate regular family meals. Although it is possible that other factors may have contributed to these results, with obesity in children continuing to rise, eating together is a great way to work towards a solution to this problem.

The more meals are eaten together, the more fruits, vegetables, grains, and calcium-rich foods are eaten and the less soft drinks are chosen by children. This is especially true in teenagers who were studied. Although at this age, teens are starting to eat more meals away from home, studies show that they are still eating more than one half of their meals at home. And 84% of teens surveyed in a study by CASA said that they would rather eat dinner with their family than eat alone.

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Tips to Make it Happen

The benefits of eating together are impressive! The key to making it happen is to not allow the realities of daily life to overshadow its importance. Make family meals a priority by setting aside a small amount of time each week to plan. Including all family members in this cooperative effort will help to assure that it is an enjoyable experience for all.

Prioritize

To make eating together work in any family, it has to be a priority for everyone. Coordination of schedules, compromises, and even sacrifices may need to be made to make it happen. If the family is scattered at dinner time, try to eat breakfast together instead. If everyone can't get home for a certain time frame, try gathering at a park for a picnic, planning a tailgate meal before an activity, or meeting at a restaurant. Be flexible, but once the plan is made try to stick to it.

Plan

Having a plan for mealtimes will make things easier. It will help to:

- Know everyone's schedule
- Write down a menu for a week
- Keep foods on hand that can be easily prepared
- Shop ahead of time

Keep it simple! Choose menus that are easy to prepare so that the focus remains on the family sharing time together. **The menu doesn't have to include a home cooked meal.** For example, on a busy night the menu could be as quick as turkey sandwiches from the deli with a fresh tossed salad, a piece of fruit and low-fat milk to drink. Or, try "breakfast" for dinner. Prepare pancakes, french toast or waffles topped with your favorite fresh fruits. Use your imagination and be creative with the meal plan and preparation. Remember, being together and sharing a meal is what counts! (See below for more Quick Nutritious Dinner Ideas.)

Cooperate

It is important to make eating together a cooperative effort to take the pressure off of the same family member preparing the food day

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after day. The whole family needs to be involved in getting the meal on the table. This will also enhance family togetherness, promote a sense of the importance of each family member and provide great opportunities to teach about nutrition, meal planning and cooking. Everyone can be involved from planning, to prep, to clean up. This is the time to delegate! Depending on age and experience, children can help with everything from washing vegetables to putting the main dish in the oven, and even little ones can help set the table.

Enjoy!

Finally, *enjoy* this special time with your family. Limit interruptions during the meal by turning off the TV and silencing phones, letting callers leave a message. Keep the atmosphere positive and pleasant, encouraging opportunities for all members to share stories of the day. Avoid discussing negative issues that may promote a tense atmosphere, including discipline or conflicts about food. Maintaining a relaxed approach to each family mealtime will go a long way in making it a family tradition that everyone will look forward to.

Quick Nutritious Dinner Ideas

- Baked fish and vegetable packets cooked in foil
- Frittata or omelet with a side salad
- Salmon burger with coleslaw
- Quick chili topped with plain yogurt and low fat cheese
- Chicken stir-fry over quick cooking brown rice
- Baked potato topped with low fat cheese, steamed broccoli and other favorite toppings
- Pasta tossed with roasted vegetables and parmesan cheese
- Rotisserie chicken with microwaved sweet potatoes and applesauce

Check out these websites for more ideas:

CASA promotes Family Day each September

www.casafamilyday.org

Ellyn Satter posts a Family Meals Focus newsletter on her website

www.ellynsatter.com/newsletter.htm

Purdue University – Center for Families

www.cfs.purdue.edu/CFF/promotingfamilymeals

USDA Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion

www.cnpp.usda.gov

Healthy meal planning made simple

www.mealsmatter.org