



Eating Together - Eating Well: Nutrient-Rich Family Meals

Fact Sheet FS1110



Cooperative Extension

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY HEALTH SCIENCES

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Eating together as a family as often as possible is important for growing families. The list of benefits of family meals continues to grow and includes promoting a healthy weight in young children and nurturing healthy lifestyles in older children. Studies also show that children who eat regular family meals eat more of what is good for them: fruits, vegetables, grains, and calcium-rich foods.

Family meals seem to be on the upswing, increasing 11% between 1998 and 2005, according to the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University (CASA). Despite this good news, childhood obesity rates are still climbing, and teens in particular are eating less than the recommended amounts of fruits and vegetables. As a result, planning and making family meals that are nutrient-rich is as important as ever.

What is a Nutrient-rich Meal?

There are six groups of nutrients in food that provide what our bodies' need for energy and good health. These nutrients are carbohydrates, fats, proteins, (only these three can provide energy) vitamins, minerals and water. A nutrient-rich food is one that has a significant amount of vitamins and minerals, yet a reasonable amount of energy, or calories. Examples include plant foods such as vegetables, fruit, legumes and whole grains, and protein foods such as fish, poultry, lean meat, and low-fat milk products.

The opposite of a nutrient-rich food is an energy-rich or energy-dense food. These foods supply a lot of calories, but few vitamins or minerals. Examples include candy, cakes, pies, fried foods and snack foods such as chips and soft drinks.

Nutrients Needed for Growing Children

To meet the needs of growing children, and all healthy Americans ages two years and above, include a variety of nutrient-rich foods

and healthy beverages in your family's meals everyday, while limiting saturated fats, trans fats, and added sugar and salt. This, along with regular physical activity, is important in promoting the future health of our children. Meeting these needs can be done with ease at family mealtime by focusing on the foods that are recommended: a variety of whole plant foods and lean protein foods, with sensible fat and beverage choices.

Choosing Whole Plant Foods

Include whole plant foods as a significant part of your family's diet by choosing a variety of fruits, vegetables, whole grains and legumes. These foods provide a large variety of vitamins, minerals and other nutrients that contribute to growth and overall health.

Fruits and vegetables provide an array of health-promoting nutrients. Think color when choosing them, the more color, the better! Create your child's plate as a new palette every-day that is filled with dark green, orange, red, white and purple fruits and vegetables. They will love the colors and you will enjoy knowing that they are eating these nutrient-rich jewels from the garden. For ease of mealtime prep, choose fresh, frozen, canned or dried fruits and vegetables, all of which provide similar nutrient values. Aim for approximately two cups of fruit, and 2-1/2 cups of vegetables each day, choosing whole fruits and vegetables over juice for children more often.

Whole grains, on the other hand, cannot always be identified by color. The proof is in the ingredient list. For most whole grain products, the words "whole" or "whole grain" will appear before the grain ingredient's name, ideally with the whole grain listed first. Some well-known whole grains include whole wheat, wild rice and brown rice, but did you know that popcorn is also a whole grain? With little added fat, popcorn is a great snack that

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the whole family can enjoy! Buckwheat, bulgur or cracked wheat, whole-grain barley, and millet are other examples of whole grains. Experiment with a variety of them to add something delicious and nutritious to every meal. Aim for about one-half of your daily grains to come from whole grains.

Legumes, or dried peas and beans, are also a great whole plant food choice that packs a powerful nutrient punch by providing a great source of plant protein. Include them in children's diets early on by adding chickpeas, white, black or red beans to casseroles, soups and salads. Legumes also make great finger foods for the younger set. Aim for several cups each week, increasing slowly and eating with plenty of fluids, if your family is not used to the high fiber content of beans.

Choosing Lean Protein Foods

Protein is an important nutrient in the diet of growing children. Round out your family's plate with choices such as fish*, white breast meat of poultry and an occasional egg, limiting the red meat choices of beef, pork and lamb. Aim for choices that are lean, low-fat or fat-free and prepare by baking, poaching or broiling to limit added fats.

Milk and milk products are also excellent sources of protein. Recommendations are for children 2 to 8 years of age to include two cups per day of fat-free or low-fat milk or milk products, increasing to three cups per day for children 9 years of age or older.

**When choosing fish for children or women of child-bearing age, be sure to check for current recommendations from the Environmental Protection Agency at www.epa.gov.*

Choosing Fats

Fat in the diet has received a great deal of attention over the years about not only how much fat is "ok" but also what types of fat to eat or to avoid. It can be confusing. Simply stated, saturated and trans fats are fats that should be limited in the diet of most healthy family members. An exception for this is for children under the age of two who need important fatty acids in their diets for development, so their fat intake should not be limited.

When choosing food items with fat, it is helpful to know that saturated fats are found in animal-based foods including meat, poultry and dairy products and in some tropical oil such as coconut, palm kernel and palm oils. Trans fats are also found in animal products, but the majority of them come from fats

that have been changed from a liquid fat to a solid. Saturated fats also tend to be solid. As a result, a simple rule of thumb when choosing a fat is to choose those that are liquid at room temperature. Examples of these include vegetable oils such as canola or olive oils, which contain mostly monounsaturated fats and safflower or soybean oils, which contain mostly polyunsaturated fats. Aim for these primarily mono- and polyunsaturated fat choices.

Choosing Beverages

For all ages, water is the recommended beverage of choice. It is important to limit sweetened beverages and juices, even 100% fruit or vegetable juice, for the benefits of water. Beverages with a high sugar content are energy-dense, with limited other benefits. On the other hand, water is an essential nutrient that quenches our thirst without the added energy that is best saved for whole food choices. Aim for 50 fluid ounces, or approximately eight cups of water each day.

Providing nutrient-rich family meals are well worth the effort to promote the health and well being of growing children. Besides being nutritious and tasty, family meals that spotlight healthful foods are setting the foundation for the choices that your children will make when they set out on their own someday.

Try these tips to make your family meals nutrient-rich:

- Keep frozen vegetables and canned beans on hand to add to casseroles, low sodium soups and stews.
- Add dried fruit to whole grains such as breakfast cereals, brown rice and couscous.
- Substitute legumes such as chickpeas, black or white beans for ground beef or poultry in recipes.
- Switch to whole grain pasta for all of your favorite pasta recipes by trying different brands to find the one your family likes.
- Serve fresh, canned or frozen fruit with low-fat yogurt from the dairy case to make "sundaes" as a quick and fun dessert.
- Ask to include a salad and/or fruit instead of fries or chips when family meals take place in a restaurant.

For more information on nutrient-rich meals, visit:

www.getmovinggethealthy.nj.rutgers.edu
www.mypyramid.gov
www.fruitsandveggiesmorematters.org

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