

Family Mealtime

A Wealth of Benefits

Ingrid Adams, Nutrition and Food Science

Many families do not take advantage of mealtimes because they are busy working, running the kids around, participating in community activities, or dealing with conflicting schedules. As a result, family mealtime is often put on hold.



Making family mealtime a reality begins with understanding the benefits of participating in the activity.

Family mealtime provides opportunities to talk, laugh, and have fun together, and it fosters family closeness. Research shows that having regular mealtimes improves the health of children, helps with their social and emotional development, and helps them do better in school. The investment in family mealtime is well worth the time and effort.

Family mealtime is not extinct!

Family mealtime is not a thing of the past. In 2000 The Kitchen Report surveyed 930 meal planners throughout the nation and found that:

- The average American family eats dinner together five times a week.
- Thirty-eight percent of meal planners mentioned that they love to cook, 46 percent did not mind cooking, and only 16 percent found cooking to be a chore.
- Two in three families eat dinner at the kitchen or dining room table. The average time spent at the dinner table is 30 minutes.

More recent information suggests that families continue to eat meals together. The National Survey of Children's Health 2007 data showed that 26 percent of children 6 to 11 years of age ate meals with their family four to five days a week, and 53.5 percent ate family meals six to seven days of the week.

Rewards on your investment in family mealtime

In the midst of busy schedules and hectic lifestyles it is easy for family mealtime to be replaced by other activities. Making family mealtime a reality begins with understanding the benefits of participating in the activity. Benefits of family mealtime include:

- Better nutrition. Children who eat regular family meals eat more fruits and vegetables and fewer fried foods, and they drink fewer sodas. As a result, these children have a higher intake of dietary fiber, calcium, iron and vitamins A, B, and C. Research shows that eating fruits and vegetables and dietary fiber may reduce a person's risk for heart disease.

- **Healthier eating habits.** Children who take part in family mealtime are more likely to develop healthy eating habits, and these habits tend to continue into adulthood.
- **Weight management.** Children who take part in regular family mealtimes are less likely to be overweight. When children eat meals with their family they are more likely to get the nutrition they need and fewer “empty” calorie foods. Research shows that children who are overweight are at greater risk for health problems later in life.
- **Better academic performance.** Regular family mealtime helps children do better at school. Young people who regularly eat dinner with their families do better on tests, spend more time on homework, and read more for pleasure. Regular family mealtime may contribute to your child’s intellectual development.
- **Social adjustment.** Family mealtime helps children, especially teenagers, to be well-adjusted. Teens that have more family meals are less likely to smoke or use alcohol and drugs. In addition, these teens have better relationships with others, are less depressed, and less likely to think of suicide.
- **Family closeness.** Having meals together as a family creates a sense of unity. This is feeling of togetherness is needed for children to feel safe and secure.

When families eat together, parents provide structure and a solid foundation for their children, as well as good habits and memories that their children will most likely pass down to their families. Do not let the busyness of life rob your family of the wealth of benefits that can be gained from family mealtime. Take steps today to make family meals a priority.

Resources

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Eat a variety of fruits and vegetables every day. <http://www.fruitsandvegetablesmatter.gov/>.
- School Wellness. <http://www.school-wellness.org/AtHome.aspx>.
- U.S. Department of Agriculture. Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2010. <http://www.health.gov/dietaryguidelines/dga2010/DietaryGuidelines2010.pdf>.
- U.S. Department of Agriculture. ChooseMyPlate. <http://www.choosemyplate.gov/>.
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