

## Benefits of Family Meals Findings from Project EAT



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Sitting down for regular family meals can be a real challenge today. Parents are busy, kids are busy. Teens may desire more autonomy and want to eat away from home with friends. Family members may be dissatisfied with their relationships with each other and avoid spending mealtimes together. Kids may just not like the food being served. But in spite of these difficulties, family meals are rumored to be good for young people. The Project EAT team at the University of Minnesota's School of Public Health has been investigating the many health benefits for teens of eating family meals.

Project EAT (Eating Among Teens) is a comprehensive study of eating patterns and weight concerns among 4,746 adolescents, conducted during the 1998-1999 school year. Thirty-one public middle and senior high schools in ethnically and socio-economically diverse communities in the urban and suburban school districts of the Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area participated in the study. A 221-item survey was designed by study investigators, drawing largely from existing adolescent health surveys, to assess a range of socio-environmental, personal and behavioral factors relevant to dietary intake and weight issues. Students completed the Project EAT survey and a food frequency questionnaire during class periods. In addition, height and weight were measured by trained research staff in a private area of the school. The response rate for student participation was 81.5%.

Project EAT found that approximately one-quarter of respondents ate seven or more family meals in the past week, and about one-quarter ate family meals twice a week or less frequently. Middle school students ate with their families an average of 5.5 times per week, and high school students, an average of four times per week.

The frequency with which a teen eats family meals appears to be associated

with a variety of psychosocial and behavioral variables, including cigarette smoking, alcohol and marijuana use, grades in school, depressive symptoms, suicidal ideation and suicide attempts. We found family mealtime to be a protective factor in the lives of adolescents for nearly all of these variables, particularly among girls. Specifically, kids who reported eating more family meals per week reported significantly less substance use and significantly better academic and mental health than those eating fewer meals with family. These associations were apparent across the spectrum of meal frequency each additional meal per week conferred some additional benefit.

Importantly, we also considered the role of family connectedness, recognizing that families who get along well may be more likely to eat together, and the results we found may simply represent the well-known protection of a cohesive family. We therefore statistically controlled for general family connectedness the teen's feelings of being cared about and being able to talk to parent(s). Even with this adjustment, family meals remained a significant protective factor for substance use, grades (for girls only), depressive symptoms and suicide behaviors (for girls only). This suggests that eating meals as a family has benefits for young people above and beyond their general sense of connection to family members, and that these benefits may apply to a broad range of health domains.

The Project EAT team has also investigated dietary intake, dieting and disordered eating behaviors as a function of family meal frequency and other characteristics (such as prioritization of family meals, positive atmosphere and structured mealtime environment). Family meal frequency and other characteristics were related to disordered eating behaviors: those eating more frequent family meals which were prioritized by the family, and structured and positive in atmosphere, reported fewer unhealthy weight control behaviors than their peers without such family meals. In analyses adjusting for all the family meal variables, priority of family meals emerged as the most consistent protective factor for disordered eating. Associations between family meal patterns and disordered eating behaviors tended to be stronger among girls than among boys. In terms of dietary intake, adolescents eating regular family meals had higher fruit, vegetable, and calcium intakes than their peers not reporting regular family meals, and they drank significantly fewer soft drinks.

We are now in the process of extending our work in this area to examine the long-term impact of family meals in adolescence. Specifically, we will explore the ways in which family meals during adolescence predict subsequent dietary intake, body mass index, disordered eating behavior and psychosocial well-being. New items added to the Project EAT follow-up survey will also enable us to describe the social eating behaviors of late adolescents (e.g., college students) who live apart from their family of origin, and identify the influence of family meals during the high school years. Additional measures will allow us to explore the roles of TV viewing during family meals and fast food consumption during family meals, and their associations with well-being.

There is great diversity in both quality and quantity of family meals among youth, and certainly many questions remain to be answered. Our research indicates, however, that family meals may indeed be worth the trouble, in that they can contribute positively to the health and well-being of young people.

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