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Family Mealtimes: More Than Just Eating Together

When something has to give, it's easy to understand why the family meal may be one of the first things to fall by the wayside. And yet, family meals are not only a time for strengthening family ties and keeping track of your children's lives, they can actually lead to better physical and mental health for your children!



Benefits of family meals

According to a survey conducted by the University of Minnesota that appears in the August 2004 issue of *The Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*, frequent family meals are related to better nutritional intake, and a decreased risk for unhealthy weight control practices and substance abuse.

A Harvard study published in the March 2000 issue of *Archives of Family Medicine* showed that eating family dinners together most or all days of the week was associated with eating more healthfully.

The study showed that families eating meals together "every day" or "almost every day" generally consumed higher amounts of important nutrients such as calcium, fiber, iron, vitamins B6 and B12, C and E, and consumed less overall fat, compared to families who "never" or "only sometimes" eat meals together.

Another University of Minnesota study published in the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* found that children who ate family meals consumed more fruits, vegetables and fewer snack foods than children who ate separately from their families.

Children who frequently eat meals with their families tend to do better in school as well. A 1994 Lou Harris-Reader's Digest national poll of high school seniors showed higher scholastic scores among students who frequently shared meals with their families. And a survey of high-achieving teens showed that those who regularly eat meals with their families tend to be happier with their present life and their prospects for the future.

Children model your behavior

When you cook and serve meals at home, you have more control over the quality and quantity of your family's food choices. Kids tend to mimic their

parents' attitudes about foods.

Children won't perceive healthy eating as important if it is not something that they see you doing. Eat and serve sensible portion sizes. Be open to trying new foods and new ways of cooking foods.

Family meals should be dynamic - an exchange of ideas, conversation and feelings. Turn off the television, the video games and the computer. Mealtime is a wonderful opportunity to strengthen family ties and pass on family cultural traditions. Encourage your kids to help prepare meals, set the table and help with dishes.

Easy meals

You can keep meals simple, yet still nutritious and interesting, by sticking to nutrition basics. Offer your kids a variety of great tasting foods from the major food groups for any meal or snack.

When time is of the essence, keep meals simple. It's easy to purchase a ready-made sauce or marinade and add it to sautéed chicken, beef or shrimp for a tasty main course.

Cook on weekends and double a favorite recipe, enjoying one meal now and freezing the other to enjoy some evening when you're too tired to cook. Soups and casseroles are especially good to freeze.

Take advantage of prepared, nutritious foods. Purchase a freshly roasted chicken from the supermarket and round out the meal with some brown rice and a green salad, and fresh fruit or yogurt for dessert.

Easy recipes for families

[Taco Salad](#)

[Easy Lasagna](#)

[Fiesta Chicken Salad](#)

[Marsala Chicken and Rice](#)

[Zucchini Spaghetti with Parmesan Cheese](#)

[Spinach Ricotta Pizza](#)

[Mexican Beef Skillet](#)

No matter how simple the meal, take the time to sit down and enjoy it with your family. Make mealtime a pleasant experience, not a time for discipline or arguing about problems at school or work. Time spent breaking bread with friends and family will help your children form positive attitudes about food and eating and create fond family memories that will last a lifetime.

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