

Regular family meals promote good health habits in kids, parents

by *Rallie_McAllister*

Gathering around the table for regular family meals improves children's eating habits and health, according to the results of a new study published in the latest issue of the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*. University of Minnesota researchers reported that youngsters who participated in family meals at least five times a week consumed more fruits, vegetables and fiber than those who dined alone.

Previous research shows that kids who enjoy regular family meals experience a number of important benefits, including better academic performance and behavior at school. Adolescents who sit down to eat with their parents are significantly less likely to experiment with cigarettes, drugs and alcohol than those who are required to fend for themselves at mealtimes.

Teenage girls who dine with their families on a regular basis are less likely to engage in binge eating and extreme weight loss practices, including self-induced vomiting and the use of diet pills, diuretics and laxatives.

Kids who dine solo, on the other hand, have greater chances of developing poor eating habits that can negatively impact their current and future health. After following 8,000 children from kindergarten to third grade, researchers at the University of Missouri-Columbia concluded that kids who ate fewer meals with their families had a significantly higher risk of becoming overweight or obese.

Rounding up the kids and shepherding them to the table for regular family meals isn't as easy as it used to be. Parents may need to schedule family meals a week or two in advance, taking advantage of evenings that aren't earmarked for work, school activities, lessons or sporting events.

If evenings are especially busy for kids and adults, eating breakfast together a few times a week might be an acceptable alternative. On weekends, getting together for a family brunch or lunch may work even better.

Family meals don't have to be elaborate to be beneficial. Most foods prepared at home are far more nutritious than the typical fast-food meal consisting of burgers and fries or pizza.

For moms and dads who don't have the time or energy to prepare home-cooked meals, a quick trip to the grocery can help. If you've got time to pick up a roasted chicken from the deli department and a few ready-to-eat fruits and vegetables from the supermarket salad bar, you'll have all the makings for a nutritious sit-down meal at home.

Although the foods that your kids eat are important, having a parent present at meals is critical. Even when parents don't set out to make mealtime an educational affair, kids learn a lot about nutrition just by watching their moms and dads eat.

Research suggests that children and adolescents are more likely to eat at least five servings of fruits and vegetables each day if their parents do. Unfortunately, kids don't just mimic their parents' healthy eating behaviors — they're also influenced by their poor nutritional choices.

Scientists at the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research recently reported that teens of soda-drinking parents are 40 percent more likely to become regular soda-drinkers, compared to teens whose moms and dads avoid soft drinks.

If you want to maximize the benefits of family meals, turning off the television is a great strategy. According to a survey conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation, an estimated 63 percent of American households keep the television turned on during mealtimes, a habit that can have a tremendously negative impact on the health of the entire family.

Studies show that young children who eat while watching television consume fewer vegetables and whole grains than children who dine with the television off. TV dining also leads to greater consumption of fried foods, pre-packaged snacks and soft drinks.

The more time kids and adults spend watching television, the greater their risk for becoming overweight or obese. It's easy to overeat when you're dining in front of a TV set, primarily because you tend to pay more attention to what's on the tube than what's in your stomach.

While you're tuned in to your favorite program, you can easily tune out your internal signals of hunger and satiety, and you may end up eating far more than you wanted or needed. TV dining also interferes with effective communication between kids and parents, which is one of the greatest benefits of family meals.

Scheduling regular, TV-free family meals is harder than it once was, but it's more important than ever. Making time to gather together at mealtime can dramatically improve the health and happiness of the entire family.

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