

Ask an Expert – Family Meals Matter: Strengthening Connections One Meal at a Time

09/18/2026

```
$(document).ready(function(){ $(''.pdf-wrapper').hide();  
$('').pageTitle').addClass('text-bold'); });
```



September marks National Family Meals Month, providing an excellent opportunity to establish the tradition of consistent family meals at home.

Regular family mealtimes can benefit the entire family. Utah State University Extension experts note that the more meals a family shares each week, the greater the benefit. In addition, children who participate in family mealtimes five or more times a week, compared with those whose families eat together two or fewer times each week, may experience improved:

- **Nutrition and physical development** – Children who participate in family mealtimes tend to be more open to trying a variety of healthy foods and develop healthy eating habits that last into adulthood. Family mealtime is an excellent opportunity to provide nutrient-rich foods such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean proteins, and calcium-rich foods. The variety of nutrients consumed at these mealtimes has been shown to lower rates of childhood obesity, reduce the risk of chronic diseases, and increase the likelihood that youth will make healthier food choices when away from home.
- **Emotional development** – Children and adolescents who participate in routine family mealtime can better navigate emotions and mental wellness, are less

likely to develop eating disorders, and have more positive interactions with food and others. This can also be a protective factor for adolescents, reducing the severity of depression and suicidal ideation and improving overall well-being.

- **Social development** – Children and youth can learn important social skills, such as taking turns and sharing thoughts, feelings, and opinions appropriately. They can also learn to connect more effectively and often discover a deeper sense of belonging.
- **Academics** – Children and adolescents who participate in and listen to family mealtime conversations are more likely to earn good grades in school and develop larger vocabularies – even more than those who read together with their parents.
- **Behavior** – Although many factors influence adolescent risky behavior, there is evidence that routine family meals may serve as a protective factor against certain risky behaviors such as substance use, sexual activity, and violence.

If eating meals together regularly is new to your family and feels overwhelming, start slowly. You could start with one or two meals a week. If dinner doesn't fit your family's schedule, try having breakfast, lunch, or even snack time together. Remember that each opportunity to sit around the table together provides many benefits.

Here are tips for making family mealtime a positive experience:

- Make weekly meal plans.
- Schedule a set time for meals.
- Involve all family members in meal preparation and clean up.
- Set boundaries to create more connections, such as not having electronic devices at the table or encouraging everyone to sit together until the last person has finished.
- Keep conversations upbeat, and leave discipline and negative emotions for another time.
- Share responsibilities with young children. The parent or caretaker's responsibility is to decide when the meal is served and what food is provided, while the child's responsibility is to decide how much food they want.
- Get creative. Have mealtime themes (i.e., taco Tuesday), try new recipes, create a conversation jar, play word games, share stories, etc.

A healthy goal for family mealtime is to connect and nourish. That will look different at each table, so have

fun this month and find new family traditions that make mealtimes positive.

Download the [Create Better Health Family Mealtime Cookbook](#), which includes recipes, conversation starters, meal-planning tips and ideas, and additional information on the benefits of regular family mealtimes.

Contact

Lea Palmer

Create Better Health director

USU Extension

Lea.Palmer@usu.edu

More Extension Updates

- [Extension News](#)
- [Gardening](#)
- [Recipes](#)
- [Personal Finance](#)
- [Relationships](#)
- [Our Impact](#)

[Tips Sign Up](#)[Take a Course](#)[Donate to Extension](#)