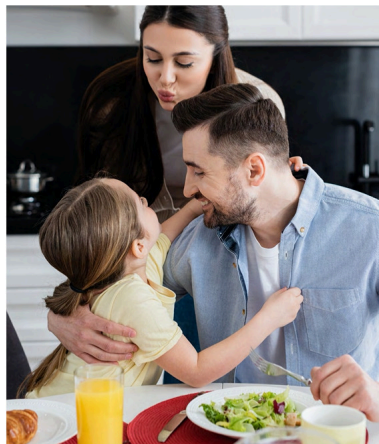


Improving Health and Well-Being Through Shared Family Meals

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12/18/2024



Shared family meals offer far more than just a chance to eat together; they provide numerous health, social, and developmental benefits for children and adolescents (Verhage et al., 2018). Research has shown that regularly sharing meals with at least one family member is associated with increased fruit and vegetable consumption, stronger family bonds, and better performance in school (Snuggs & Harvey, 2023). Despite these benefits, many parents experience stress or feel overwhelmed by the demands of providing regular family meals. This fact sheet delves into the numerous advantages of shared family meals and provides practical tips to overcome common obstacles to shared family meals, making it easier to incorporate these valuable moments into your family's routine.

Benefits of Shared Family Meals

While the term “shared family meals” is used, it is important to recognize that family structures come in many forms. The specifics of who participates in a shared meal—whether it is two parents, a single parent, or another caregiver in the home—can vary greatly from one family to another. Regardless of the family makeup, the benefits of shared family meals are consistent across different family configurations (Daragan et al., 2023; Fiese & Jones, 2012). These benefits follow.

- **Improved diet quality:** Children and adolescents who regularly participate in family meals tend to eat more fruits, vegetables, and important nutrients such as calcium and iron (Skeer et al., 2023; Verhage et al., 2018). Family meals are also linked to reduced intake of high-calorie, low-nutrient foods, such as sugary drinks and processed snacks (Verhage et al., 2018). These healthy eating habits can have lifelong positive effects on a child's mental, physical, and social well-being (Wu et al., 2019).
- **Promoted healthy weight and positive relationship with food:** Children and adolescents who share at least three family meals per week are more likely to be in a healthy weight range and are less likely to develop disordered eating behaviors (Hammons & Fiese, 2011). They are also less likely to have a negative body image (Harrison et al., 2015). Additionally, shared family meals can help children recognize their hunger and fullness cues, reduce picky eating behaviors, and increase their willingness to try new foods (Powell et al., 2017; Verhage et al., 2018).
- **Reduced risky behaviors:** Adolescents who regularly share meals with a parent or guardian are less likely to engage in risky behaviors, including violence, early sexual activity, bullying, substance abuse, and delinquency (Fulkerson et al., 2006; Lora et al., 2014; Skeer et al., 2023; Snuggs & Harvey, 2023).
- **Improved mental health:** Regular family meals are associated with better mental health outcomes, such as increased self-esteem and reduced levels of depression, anxiety, stress, self-harm, and suicidal thoughts (Harrison et al., 2015; Victoria-Montesinos et al., 2023). While these benefits are connected to consistent family meals over time, family meals can have immediate impacts on a child's day-to-day well-being. One study found that adolescents feel happier, experience less stress, and have a stronger

sense of fulfillment on days they eat with their family (Armstrong-Carter & Telzer, 2020).

- **Improved academic performance:** Research has found that frequent shared family meals are associated with children's academic success (Verhage et al., 2018). Shared family mealtimes provide opportunities to develop new vocabulary words, develop effective communication skills, and acquire new knowledge (Martin-Briggers et al., 2014). Consequently, children who regularly eat with their families not only achieve higher grades but also demonstrate greater commitment to their schoolwork and complete their homework more consistently (Glanz et al., 2021; Lora et al., 2014).
- **Strengthened family relationships:** Regular family meals can help strengthen family bonds by improving communication among family members, fostering closeness, and enhancing adolescents' perceptions of family relationships and support (Martin-Briggers et al., 2014).
- **Increased parental benefits:** Shared family meals benefit parents and caregivers, not just children and adolescents. Parents who share meals with their family consume more fruits and vegetables, experience lower stress and depression levels, and enjoy better self-esteem and family relationships (Utter et al., 2017). These parents also tend to eat less fast food and engage in fewer dieting and binge-eating behaviors (Berge et al., 2014).



Challenges to Sharing Family Meals

While shared family meals offer many benefits, several challenges can make it difficult for families to enjoy them regularly (Snuggs & Harvey, 2023). Busy schedules, work commitments, and extracurricular activities often leave little time for family meals. Younger children may struggle with sitting still or being fussy, while adolescents may have obligations that conflict with family mealtimes. Other common hurdles include accommodating a family member's different dietary preferences, the stress of planning and preparing meals, and the temptation of screens during meals. Acknowledging and taking steps to address these challenges can help you establish and maintain a successful family mealtime routine. In the following section, we offer practical tips to help you

overcome these obstacles and make family meals more manageable.

Tips for Establishing Shared Family Meals

- **Start small and find a routine that works for you.** It is important not to overwhelm yourself with the idea that every meal has to be a family affair. Start by identifying one or two meals a week where your family can gather and build from there. Whether it is breakfast on weekends or a simple dinner during the week, the key is consistency rather than perfection. Over time, these shared meals will become a natural part of your routine.
- **Prioritize family meals but be flexible.** Life can be busy and unpredictable, and while consistency is important, it is also okay to be flexible. If busy or changing schedules make it challenging to sit down together, consider alternatives like sharing a quick snack and still gathering for meals even if one or more family members cannot be there. Be realistic and flexible in your expectations. The goal is to create regular opportunities for connection, so find what works best for your family and adapt as needed without feeling guilty.
- **Keep meals simple and plan ahead.** Family meals do not need to be elaborate to be meaningful. Simple dishes can make the experience enjoyable and keep stress to a minimum. Learning to cook meals in a slow cooker or preparing large batches of meals or staple ingredients that can be refrigerated or frozen for later can save valuable time. Planning meals ahead of time can also reduce mealtime pressure (Eck et al., 2018).
- **Involve the family in meal preparation.** Getting the whole family involved in preparing meals can lighten the load and make mealtimes more enjoyable for everyone. Children of all ages can contribute—young children can help mix ingredients, older children can set the table or clean up, and teenagers can assist with cooking (Dean et al., 2021). You can also involve children in choosing meals or shopping for ingredients.
- **Turn off the screens.** The benefits of sharing meals as a family can diminish when screens, such as phones, televisions, or tablets, are present. These devices can distract children from recognizing their natural hunger and fullness cues and have been linked to increased unhealthy foods consumption (Jensen et al., 2022; Tabares-Tabares et al., 2022). Additionally, screens interfere with connecting with one another in a meaningful way and lead to

adolescents devaluing the importance of family meals (Trofholz et al., 2017). To maximize the positive impact of shared meals, keep screens off and focus on being present with one another.

- **Create a positive atmosphere.** A welcoming mealtime environment can make the experience more enjoyable for everyone. Focus on sharing positive emotions, engaging in warm interactions, and enjoying each other's company (Smith et al., 2022). It is best to save difficult or stressful conversations, as well as discipline, for another time. Instead, keep the topics light to help children associate mealtime with a safe and loving space (Knobl et al., 2022). Encourage healthy eating by setting a good example and letting children decide how much they want to eat, without pressure or strict rules around food (Mahmood et al., 2021).

Summary

Shared family meals provide numerous benefits for children, adolescents, and parents, including improved diet quality, healthier weight, better academic performance, stronger family bonds, and enhanced mental health. Regular family meals help children develop healthier eating habits, reduce risky behaviors, and foster communication skills. Despite challenges such as busy schedules and differing dietary preferences, families can overcome obstacles by starting small, keeping meals simple, involving everyone in meal prep, and minimizing distractions like screens. Creating a positive, flexible mealtime routine can help integrate these valuable moments into family life.



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November 2024
Utah State University Extension
Peer-reviewed fact sheet

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