

BENEFITS OF FAMILY MEALS

Life can be hectic for a lot of us! While meals in front of the TV or on-the-go may be the go-to option sometimes, there are lots of benefits we can gain from sitting down together as a family for mealtimes. Here are a few things to consider and a few ideas to get you started on forming this habit.

Food isn't just nourishment. It's social connection.

Something we've learned from the pandemic is just how important social connection is for humans – we need it. The U.S. Surgeon General has declared loneliness to be an epidemic across all age groups.¹ An easy way to alleviate this is to enjoy meals together. Years of research through groups like The Family Dinner Project has discovered children and teens who regularly eat with their families consume more fruits and vegetables, have higher self-esteem and body image, and have lower rates of substance abuse, teen pregnancy, depression, and eating disorders.² Mealtimes are an opportunity to create the space to enjoy each other's company: share what happened throughout your day, laugh together, and allow a chance to reflect on what is truly important. Keep conversations light; think of this as a time to collectively relax. The day is done and it's time to enjoy your meal and each other.

Get the family involved.

Giving everyone a small task not only helps mealtime come together quickly but gives everyone a purpose and sense of accomplishment. Need some ideas? One person can be tasked with finding recipes, another creates the grocery list, another helps assemble and prepare the meals while others help clean up.

Keep meals simple during the week.

For evenings when we don't have much time, simple meals with just a few ingredients can go a long way. Salad kits, frozen ingredients, canned goods, sandwiches, and crock pot or one-pan meals are all helpful ways to make your meals easier, making family meals more possible. Additionally, the less complicated a recipe is, the more likely it is that all family members can become involved in the process of preparing it together, regardless of kitchen skills.

Start slow.

If you currently do not eat meals as a family, try one next week and build from there. A 2012 Columbia University study found that 5-7 family meals per week—including breakfast, lunch, dinner, or even snack or dessert—provided the greatest benefits for teens and overall family health.² However, the goal isn't to hit some magic number, but to instead try to find as many opportunities as possible to eat as a family at any time of day. Stay connected!

1. Office of the U.S. Surgeon General. *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community*. Department of Health and Human Services; 2023. Accessed May 31, 2023. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>
2. The Family Dinner Project website. Accessed May 31, 2023. <https://thefamilydinnerproject.org/about-us/benefits-of-family-dinners/>