

Sit Down and Eat with Family – Sharing Meals Does a Family Good

Tallahassee Democrat

Jo Shuford-Law, Extension Agent IV, Leon County Extension Service—Family & Consumer Sciences

Eating more family meals can actually improve the entire family's food habits. Family meals are associated with the same smart food choices that promote healthy weights. Children tend to eat more fruits, vegetables, grains and dairy foods at meals shared with parents. They also lower their soft drink intake. Those teens eating more often with their families have higher intakes of key nutrients like calcium, iron, vitamins A, C, E, B6 and folate, as well as fiber.

However the most important part of family mealtime is simply -- the **family**. Children learn by modeling themselves after their parents. Eating together allows parents to set a good example and show their children how to choose nutritious foods, know when they are full and how to try new foods. They also learn social skills like table manners and conversation. The family meal allows family members to share information on activities, interests and even concerns. For this sharing to take place, distractions need to be limited. In other words, turn off the TV and do **not** answer the phone.

Promoting Healthy Families has long been the campaign of the award winning coalition, Eat Right Montana. "Eating Together, Playing Together", the 2007 campaign theme was selected because of the wealth of information that shows family-style meals are about much more than people eating at the same time. According to an article in the April 2006 *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, the family meal is "a potential public health measure for improving dietary quality, reducing overweight and improving education and social outcomes."

Katie Bark, Registered Dietitian with the Team Nutrition Program at Montana State University, says "simply eating more meals together can improve physical, mental, and emotional health for your whole family." Family meals increase intergenerational communication and a sense of family unity, which can have tremendous impacts on many aspects of a young person's life.

The Importance of Family Dinners III, a 2006 survey by the National Center for Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University showed just how important family meals can be. The report revealed that young people who ate dinner with their family five or more times per week were more likely to say that they receive either all A's or mostly A's and B's in school. Teens who had family dinners less than two times per week were more than twice as likely to have tried cigarettes and one and one-half times likelier to have tried alcohol. Family meal frequency is also linked to fewer behavior problems in school and improved youth self esteem.

Eating more meals together can make a big difference in your family's health, happiness and finances. Dinners at home can be less expensive and easier than you think! Consider the following ideas:

Plan a weekly menu: Make it simple – the key is to have a plan. Involve everyone; let each person have a night to pick their favorite dishes.

Cook once and eat twice: To save time cook and freeze key ingredients like low fat ground beef or turkey for tacos, spaghetti, lasagna or other favorites. Cook a pot of brown rice and store family size portions in the freezer. These are cost- and time-saving strategies that definitely provide more nutrients than most drive-thru fast food!

Keep the kitchen stocked: Packing your pantry and freezer with staples like canned beans, tuna, fruit, rice, baking mixes and frozen vegetables will make supper more of a quick fix.

So if the family is running in 10 different directions and it's almost time to eat — remember a meal doesn't have to be gourmet or hot to be healthy. Cold sandwiches, a salad and some frozen, low fat yogurt make a healthy meal.

No matter when you have that family meal, breakfast, lunch, dinner or bed time snack, enjoy the time spent with each other! Research indicates what matters most is the time spent eating together "without arguments or scolding." Whatever you choose to do remember that it's most important you do it together and have FUN!