



Cooperative Extension Service

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Family Mealtime

As the holiday season begins to approach (Halloween counts, right?) I am reminded of the wonderful family meals that are the centerpiece of many holiday traditions. While these are certainly a great holiday tradition family meals should not be reserved just for holidays. In fact, there is an abundance of scientific research pointing to some pretty impressive benefits of regular family meals.

Have you ever heard of teenagers having behavior problems? I know it is quite rare (catching my sarcasm yet?), but those familiar with this problem may be able to find some relief by planning regular family mealtimes. That's right, research from Columbia University has shown that teenagers who eat more family meals are less likely to smoke cigarettes, use illegal drugs, use or abuse alcohol, become depressed, develop eating disorders, or become pregnant.

And here's a benefit that may not be quite so surprising: regular family meals help people eat better. Eating more often with family improves intake of fruits, vegetables, grains and dairy—along with many key nutrients! Even better, long-term research shows that this has a lasting effect on children and teens—improving their food habits well into their 20s and beyond. Also not surprisingly, these better food habits lead to better health. Children that eat more family meals are more likely to maintain a healthy weight and less likely to develop eating disorders.

Still not entirely convinced? In addition to improved behavior and health, children who spend more time eating meals with their families are more successful in class and on academic achievement tests. Family meals are not just for eating! Conversations during meals help children to learn language skills that are critical for success in school and in life.

So how can you make these family mealtimes take place? Planning is critical—and let your children help! Kids of all ages can lend a hand by choosing a main dish or a specific fruit or vegetable they may want to include. Family meals should be a priority, but this doesn't need to happen overnight! Start by planning one more meal together, and when this seems natural you can add another. While experts have not identified a specific number of family meals necessary for the greatest benefit, most agree that we should be aiming for at least 3-5/week.

If there were a pill that promised all of these benefits it would be selling off the shelves, but thankfully there is no pill that can replace the value of family mealtime. So turn off the TV, silence those cell phones, and dust off the table for an old-fashioned family meal. And be careful, you just might enjoy it! *Kentz Willis, M.S., is the University of Wyoming Extension Educator in Nutrition and Food Safety for Northeast Wyoming. He can be reached via email at kwillis3@uwyo.edu.*