

Families who eat together are healthier

Written by Holyoke Enterprise

Across cultures, over centuries, eating has been a social occasion for families as well as among friends.

But in many homes today, life is shoving the family meal aside. Americans are more likely to eat alone than people in other countries, and American families are less likely to eat together than families elsewhere.

Now comes research that says we may not be doing ourselves a favor by letting the family meal go.

When families eat together frequently, nutrition improves for both parents and children. Children get more fruits, vegetables, dairy and key minerals (calcium, iron and zinc), key vitamins (folate, B6, B12, C and E) and fiber, and less saturated and trans fats.

But it's not just about the nutrition. Teens and parents alike acknowledge that the family dinner table is not just about the food. It's a time when the family talks together.

"Eating together really does nourish body and soul," says registered dietitian Judy Barbe, senior nutrition director for Western Dairy Association. "The benefits of family meals are showing up in study after study. Families feel more connected and the results are far-reaching."

When the University of Minnesota conducted a major study of 4,750 adolescents from the Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minn. area, researchers discovered that the more meals teen girls shared weekly with their parents the less likely they were to be caught up in eating disorders, such as extreme weight control, binge eating and chronic dieting.

Another recent study found that family meals correlated with fewer risky behaviors, such as use of alcohol, tobacco and marijuana among teen girls. Suicide ideation, depression and low self-esteem went down and grades rose as family meals increased. A follow-up study five years later found substance abuse remained low among the girls.

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A similar study that included boys found self-esteem, sense of purpose and school involvement rise among both sexes with increased family meals. Yet another study revealed that family meals help overweight adolescents exhibit healthier psychological attitudes and behaviors.

With all that going for the family meal, why don't we do it more often?

Time and schedule conflicts, primarily.

"It's not that families don't want to eat together," says Barbe. Both parents and teenagers say they value family meals. One study found 79 percent of teens like to eat at home with their parents."

Busy working moms and organized after-school activities are major challenges for family togetherness around the table. Convenience foods are readily available and fast-food restaurants have become an integral part of our culture. Then there are those picky appetites.

"The challenges are real," says Barbe, "but the values of family meals are so far-reaching and have such positive impacts on children and teenagers that even in the face of today's realities, it's worthwhile to figure out how to make family meals happen more often."

Barbe says today's time-stressed moms don't want to spend time preparing or cleaning up after meals, don't want to travel far to pick up meals, and don't want to spend time waiting for meals in restaurants. Fast-food restaurants pick up the slack.

"Economic concerns are compelling 71 percent of Americans to cook at home more, and some don't have a lot of experience or cooking skills," says Barbe. "I've noticed some supermarkets supplying easily prepared meal ideas combined with grocery lists and costs."

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Barbe suggests aiming at three to four meals a week together.

“If family members are tied up every evening, the family meal might be breakfast, or relaxed weekend meals,” Barbe says. “The TV should be off, and parents should take the lead in making the meal a positive experience, resisting impulses to harp about homework, hairdos or other concerns.”