



# The Surprising Benefits of the Family Meal

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## ABSTRACT

This article is a literature review on the surprising benefits of family meals. The family meal has declined drastically since 1966. Families who have frequent family meals often see the following benefits with their children and youth: enhanced vocabulary, academic success, healthy food selections, demonstration of positive values, and avoidance of high-risk behaviors (substance abuse, sexual activity, depression/suicide, violence, school problems, binge eating/purging, and excessive weight loss). Nurse practitioners are in an excellent position to assess for family meal frequency and encourage families to make family meals a reality.

**Keywords:** academic success, eating alone, family closeness, family connectedness, frequent family meals, healthy food choices, high-risk behaviors, intellectual development, watching TV

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This CE learning activity is designed to augment the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of nurse practitioners and assist in their understanding of the benefits of the family meal.

### At the conclusion of this activity, the participant will be able to:

- Explain the development of the phenomenon of eating alone
- Describe the benefits of frequent family meals on individuals of all ages
- Identify high-risk behaviors minimized in youth by frequent family meals

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**M**ost healthcare dollars are spent on disease management. Ninety-six cents of every medical care dollar go to treating disease; only 4 cents of every medical care dollar are spent on health promotion and disease prevention.<sup>1</sup> Preventable chronic diseases such as obesity, diabetes, and heart disease are responsible for 75% of all medical expenditures.<sup>2</sup> Dr. Denis Burkitt said, “If people are constantly falling off a cliff, you could place ambulances under the cliff or build a fence on top of the cliff. We are placing all too many ambulances under the cliff.”<sup>3</sup>

This article is an overview of the surprising benefits of family meals. Frequent family meals can enhance language development, emotional stability, and healthy eating and may play a role in the prevention of many high-risk behaviors in youth. Family meal education can be viewed as a protective fence to prevent families and children from falling off the proverbial cliff.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In the America of yesteryear, a family gathering around the dinner table was a national pastime. Today, because of our fast-paced society, celebrating the family table on a nightly basis has almost vanished from the American landscape. The family meal has declined drastically since 1966.<sup>4</sup> Over the past 4 decades, the family meal has been replaced with eating alone, grazing, eating in one’s vehicle, and eating while watching television or working on the computer.

## EATING ALONE

Modified eating trends have affected families as well as individuals in all age groups. College campuses across the country have identified a switch in dining patterns as well. In the past, college students enjoyed eating with friends in a cafeteria setting. Companies that operate college cafeterias report the majority of students no longer dine at tables with classmates, but prefer to engage in solitary behavior while eating. Perhaps this new era of college students are only practicing what they have learned at home: they grab sandwiches, salads, or yogurts to go in order to work on their computers, listen to music, or text friends.<sup>5</sup> Many campuses have traded cafeteria trays for to-go boxes. This phenomenon is seen not only on college campuses but as well in bowling alleys. A book called *Bowling Alone* examines the new American fondness for being

alone—no longer bowling in leagues and eating together but bowling and eating alone.<sup>6</sup> Nurse practitioners (NPs) need to be aware of the deleterious and widespread epidemic of eating alone and the abandonment of eating together.

## PERCEPTION OF MEALS

Some might think that youth do not like eating meals with their families, yet a survey showed that 79% of teens indicated that they enjoyed dining with their families.<sup>7</sup> This same group of teens reported that they preferred family meals to watching TV and rated their enjoyment of family meals as high as going on vacation.<sup>7</sup> It is reported that 65% of teens and 75% of parents said they would be willing to give up a weekend activity if that would enable them to have dinner as a family.<sup>8</sup> The trend of declining family meals may not be because family members do not enjoy eating together but other activities have trumped family meals (i.e. work, sports, afterschool activities, television viewing, etc.).

## INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT AND ACADEMIC SUCCESS

Frequent family meals can have a positive impact on vocabulary and intellectual development of children. Young children who enjoy regular family meals have greater vocabularies and reading skills. Dr. Catherine Snow from Harvard’s Graduate School of Education tracked 65 families over 15 years with a focus on mealtime conversations as a key to language acquisition.<sup>9</sup> She found that family meal conversations help promote greater vocabularies in children. Expanded vocabularies help with reading skills and good readers tend to succeed in all school subjects.<sup>9</sup>

A University of Illinois study of 120 boys and girls ages 7-11 found that the children who excelled in school and on achievement tests more commonly came from homes that participated in frequent family meals.<sup>10</sup> A *Reader’s Digest* survey of more than 2,000 high-school seniors found that frequent and consistent family meals were a strong predictor of academic success, regardless if the student had one or both parents in the home.<sup>11</sup> The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University found that good grades were highly correlated with the frequency of family meals.<sup>8</sup> Frequent family meal times can positively affect the cognitive development and academic achievement of youth from early childhood through the teen years.

## FAMILY CLOSENESS

Regular family meals are associated with family closeness and the emotional well-being of all family members. Family meals are often viewed as the very glue of a society. Family meals serve as the basis of “food memories” that form early in childhood and continue throughout a lifetime.<sup>12</sup> The family meal experiences provide opportunities to touch all of our senses (taste, smell, touch, sight, and hearing [listening to conversation]). The smell of a particular food (i.e., turkey baking in the oven) can trigger a food memory that lasts a lifetime. Traditions and rituals promote unity, stability, and routine,<sup>13</sup> and the family meal is central to forming family rituals and traditions. Routines such as family meals may have a protective value related to the risks associated with single-parent families.<sup>14</sup>

## FAMILY CONNECTEDNESS

Another benefit of family meals is family connectedness. Younger children benefit from the routine of family meals, which creates a sense of belonging and emotional security.<sup>14</sup> Children who are knowledgeable about their family history through family meal discussion and other interactions reported that they had closer relationships with family members, higher self-esteem, and a greater sense of control over their lives.<sup>15</sup> Consistent family meals are associated with positive values in youth, such as a dedication to learning, social skills, and self worth.<sup>14</sup> Teens who had five or more meals per week reported less stress and tension in their families and were more prone to go to their parents with a serious problem.<sup>15</sup> These same teens also reported that their parents were very or fairly proud of them.<sup>15</sup>

## PARENTAL JOB SATISFACTION RELATED TO FAMILY MEALS

Family meals play an important role with the well-being of parents, too. Research has identified that parents whose employment interfered with family mealtimes reported a greater dissatisfaction with their job and their professional future.<sup>16</sup> Parents reported a lower perception of success at work when work schedules disrupted dinnertime. Parents who had jobs that did not interfere with family mealtime reported a stronger relationship with their children and spouse.<sup>16</sup> Job satisfaction is connected to having time to come home and participate in family meals.

## HELPFUL STRATEGIES FOR MAKING FAMILY MEALS A REALITY<sup>19,22,26</sup>

- Prioritize your week and schedule at least 3–4 family meals per week.
- Plan a menu for the week and include healthy foods.
- Be creative with place and time of meal (e.g., Saturday morning breakfast, picnic before sports practice).
- Make your family meal a distraction-free zone and turn off all electronics (phone, TV, etc.).
- Encourage all family members to help in meal preparation.
- Teach children and young people how to cook.
- Avoid all subjects that may lead to conflict (find an alternative time to discuss sensitive subjects).
- Be creative and make family meals fun.

## OPRAH WINFREY FAMILY MEAL CHALLENGE

In 1993, five families volunteered to participate in Oprah Winfrey’s “Family Dinner Challenge.” These five families contracted to eating dinner together every night for a month and committed to staying at the table for at least half an hour during each meal. Families reported that, at the beginning of this exercise, they felt like the family meal lasted forever. This perception changed: by the end of the month, the families reported that they actually valued this time together and were committed to continue eating meals together each night. The children of these families reported that they enjoyed and counted on this time with their parents at the dinner table.<sup>17</sup>

## DISTRACTIONS DURING THE FAMILY MEAL

New research identifies that the quality of the time (with the least distractions) spent during the family meal is important.<sup>8</sup> Teens who have infrequent family meals report that more distractions are present at the dinner table (talking on phone, texting, laptops, and video-games).<sup>8</sup> Teens who report infrequent and distracted meals are three times more likely to use marijuana and tobacco and are two and a half times more likely to use alcohol.<sup>8</sup> It is important that parents and children make

every effort to turn off every possible distraction. The quality of time spent at the table is important.

The number one distraction during family meals is the television. Television viewing during family meals negatively impacts conversation and healthy food intake.<sup>18</sup> When families view television while eating, their diets tend to be lower in fruits and vegetables and higher in consumption of pizza and snack foods.<sup>18</sup> Television and arguments during meals were associated with less healthy food intake.<sup>18</sup> Parents eat more fruits and vegetables when they sit down for a family meal, especially when the television is off.<sup>18</sup> Families who eat together without viewing television eat the healthiest.<sup>18</sup>

### **FAMILY MEALS AND CHOICES YOUNG PEOPLE MAKE**

Research has consistently shown a clear relationship between the frequency of family meals and the choices that young people make in the following three areas: healthy food selections,<sup>19</sup> positive values,<sup>8</sup> and avoidance of high-risk behaviors.<sup>8,15</sup> These choices impact not only the current situation of young people but also long-term outcomes and ultimately the generations that follow.

### **HEALTHY FOOD CHOICES**

The impact of family meals on healthy food choices is critical in this day when few children and adults meet dietary guidelines. Studies have shown that when middle-school students had frequent family meals, they had less soft drink consumption, less concern with high body weight, and higher self-efficacy for healthy eating.<sup>19</sup> Frequent family meals are positively associated with regular breakfast meal and fruit intake.<sup>20</sup> Regular breakfast intake with teens is an important indicator of healthy lifestyle patterns, as well as an obesity-prevention practice.<sup>21</sup>

The positive impact of family meals on nutrition affects all ages—especially teens. Teens who frequently eat with their families partake in consumption of more vegetables, fruits, grains, calcium-rich foods, and macronutrients and fewer soft drinks.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, teens who regularly eat meals with their families are more likely to continue making eating with friends and family as young adults a priority.<sup>19</sup> Teen girls who eat regular family meals are more likely to eat breakfast as young women.<sup>22</sup> Family meals also have a protective effect with adolescent girls in regards to extreme weight control behaviors/disordered eating (i.e., binge eating and chronic dieting).<sup>19</sup> Young adulthood is a critical period because

lifelong eating patterns are often set at this time. A study has now identified that family meal frequency during adolescence leads to young adults who have a higher intake of vegetables, fruit, and dark-green and orange vegetables and decreased intake of soft drinks.<sup>19</sup>

### **OBESITY**

Family meal frequency may also be related to a decreased risk of obesity. At-risk adolescents who report that they never eat family dinners are much more likely to be overweight than adolescents who report that they eat five to seven family meals per week.<sup>23</sup> However, it is interesting to note that these findings are not equivocal. One study of youth showed that young adolescent females who do not eat dinner with their families are at risk for being overweight, but that risk may not persist over a period of 5 years.<sup>24</sup> This study also identified that eating family meals during high school may not protect individuals from becoming overweight in young adulthood.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps what is served at family meals is as important as how frequent the meals are.

### **PREVENTION OF HIGH RISK BEHAVIORS**

Family meal frequency may prevent high-risk behaviors among youth. Children who enjoy frequent family meals are less likely to smoke, drink, or use drugs.<sup>8,19</sup> In several studies, an inverse relationship was found between the frequency of family dinners and all high-risk behaviors (i.e., substance abuse, sexual activity, depression/suicide, antisocial behaviors, violence, school problems, binge eating/purging, and excessive weight loss).<sup>8,19</sup> Teens that have five to seven family meals per week when compared to those who have three or fewer meals per week are less likely to smoke, drink, or use drugs.<sup>8,19</sup> In families that do not have a close relationship with each other, frequent family meals can still be protective in reducing the risk of problem behaviors in youth.<sup>15</sup>

### **FAMILY MEALS AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE**

Teens who have frequent family meals perform better academically. Teens who report frequent family mealtimes are more likely to get better grades in school.<sup>8,19</sup> Teens who have dinner with their families seven times a week are 40% more likely to receive mostly As and Bs on their report card compared to teens that have dinner with their families two or less times a week.<sup>8</sup> A high academic performance has a protective impact on substance abuse.

Teenagers that earn the grade of C or lower are at greater risk for substance abuse than students who receive all As or mostly As and Bs.<sup>8</sup>

## SUMMARY

Given the importance of frequent family meals and their impact on dietary and behavioral well-being of children and youth, it is critical that healthcare providers educate patients regarding the benefits, resources, and strategies to overcome barriers in making frequent family meals a reality. The American Medical Association recently convened an expert panel to address the childhood obesity epidemic. Their recommendations included encouraging family meals on most, if not all, days of the week.<sup>25</sup>

NPs can assess family meal frequency, educate families on the many benefits of consistent family meals, and help families strategize on how to prepare healthy meals and gather around the table so that regular meals together can become a reality. The translation of family meal research into clinical practice has the potential of dramatically increasing the health and well being of the patients NPs serve. If the many health benefits of family meals can be communicated, it just might inspire the return of the age-long tradition of dinnertime around the table to households across the county. Family meals do make a difference!<sup>26</sup> **JNP**

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## EXCELLENT RESOURCES

- **Promoting Family Meals**, Purdue University, Center for Families, <http://www.cfs.purdue.edu/CFF/promotingfamilymeals/index.html>
- **The Intentional Family**, "Simple Rituals to Strengthen Family Ties," [http://www.fhp.org/fhpdocs/help\\_familyMealsAtHome.pdf](http://www.fhp.org/fhpdocs/help_familyMealsAtHome.pdf)
- **Cooking Dinner on a Busy Schedule** <http://www.rd.com/content/printContent.do?contentId=15947>
- **Family Meals Spell S-U-C-C-E-S-S** [http://www.cfs.purdue.edu/cff/documents/promoting\\_meals/spellsuccessfactsheet.pdf](http://www.cfs.purdue.edu/cff/documents/promoting_meals/spellsuccessfactsheet.pdf)

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