

FitFacts®

How can I encourage my family to eat more family meals together?

KIDS WHO REGULARLY EAT MEALS WITH THEIR FAMILIES ARE NOT ONLY HEALTHIER, BUT THEY ALSO DO BETTER IN SCHOOL, DEVELOP MORE ADVANCED LANGUAGE SKILLS AND ARE LESS LIKELY TO DRINK ALCOHOL OR EXPERIMENT WITH DRUGS AS TEENAGERS (FIESE AND SCHWARTZ, 2008). HERE IS A FIVE-STEP PLAN TO MAKE FAMILY MEALS A MORE FREQUENT OCCURRENCE AT YOUR HOUSE:

Commit to making eating together a priority. That sounds simple enough, but if you don't commit to eating a certain number of meals per week together, then barriers to eating together will become overwhelming and you may fall into the old habits. Think twice before signing a child up for yet another activity that will extend into dinnertime.

Set a time for dinner. Choose a time when everyone is most likely to be present, even if that means you push off dinner until 7:30 or eat earlier at 5:00. Kids can adjust snack times and amounts to make sure that they're hungry (but not ravenous) for dinner.

Plan meals ahead. The chances of coming home after a long day of work, deciding what to make for dinner and then finding all the right ingredients are slim to none. Avoid this problem by spending an hour coming up with a menu for the week. Consider creating a family calendar that includes everyone's activities, as well as the planned menu for each day. Everyone will know what to expect, and you can maximize the chances you'll be able to quickly put together a healthy family meal.

Shop efficiently. On your weekly [shopping trip](#), buy all the ingredients you'll need for the week so you can avoid having to make multiple trips to the store. Increase the likelihood that your picky eaters will actually eat dinner by bringing them along and offering choices of which healthy foods they would most like to eat. (For example, if you're planning a steamed vegetable as a side, give your child the choice between carrots or broccoli.)



Multitask preparation time. The time required to make a meal after a long day can be a major barrier to cooking a family meal, especially when it's much quicker to grab fast food. Make it easier on yourself by choosing easy-to-prepare meals and involving your kids in meal preparation. You can speed up meal-prep time, teach them how to prepare healthy foods, and spend some quality family time together.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[American Council on Exercise](#)

Fiese, B.H., and Schwartz, M. (2008). Reclaiming the Family Table: Mealtimes and Child Health and Wellbeing. Society for Research in Child Development.

Hammons, A.J. and Fiese, B.H. (2011). Is frequency of shared family meals related to the nutritional health of children and adolescents? *Pediatrics*, 127, 6, 1565-1574.

Hannon, P.A. et al. (2003). Correlations in perceived food use between the family food preparer and their spouses and children. *Appetite*, 40, 1, 77-83.

Sweetman, C. et al. (2011). Characteristics of family mealtimes affecting children's vegetable consumption and liking. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, 111, 2, 269-273.