

The Family Dinner Table and the Health of Our Children Traditional Wisdom and New Data

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Decline in Frequency of Family Dinners

- About a one-third decline in family dinners since the late 1970s.¹
- Families with children under age 18 report 3-4 family dinners per week.²
- The frequency of family dinners goes down as children get older.³
- New research: Barriers reported by parents: time and scheduling (adults' and children's) are the greatest, plus food preparation and social dynamics of meal times.²
- New research: Most parents say they place a very high value on family meals, ranking them above every other activity (including vacations, playing together, and religious services) in helping them connect with their families and kids. Most wish they had more family dinners.²

Quality of Family Dinners

- There is a relationship between dinner frequency and ritual quality. Teens having fewer family meals report much more TV during meals, little talk during dinner, and that the meals do not last long enough.³
- New research: The average family has an array of distractions and simultaneous activities, including TV (50%), cleaning up from preparing dinner (26%), telephone/cell phone conversations (16%), using other communications technologies (13%), and reading (11%).²

Benefits of Family Meals

- Mealtime a strong predictor of childhood well being. A national study of young children's time (age 3-12) found that more meal time at home was the single strongest predictor of better achievement scores and fewer behavioral problems. Meal time was a more powerful than time spent in school, studying, church, playing sports, or art activities. Results were statistically controlled for age and gender of child, race and ethnicity, education and age of the head of the family, family structure and employment, income, and family size.¹
- Family meals have been found to generate the largest amount of family talk and sophisticated word usage in comparison to other activities including toy

playing and storybook reading. There are strong correlations between child vocabulary development and mealtime conversations. This is especially true when there are extended discussions around a specific topic by families at the dinner table.⁹

- The largest federally funded study of American teenagers found a strong association between regular family meals (five or more dinners per week with a parent) and academic success, psychological adjustment, and lower rates of alcohol use, drug use, early sexual behavior, and suicidal risk. (Results held for both one parent and two parent families and after controlling for social class factors).⁴
- A national pool of teens supported these findings: in a comparison between teens with 5+ family meals per week, those with 2 or fewer family meals per week were three times more likely to use marijuana, 2.5 times more likely to smoke cigarettes, and 1.5 times more likely to drink alcohol. Those with more meals report lower family stress and tension, parents who are proud of them, and more ability to confide in a parent.³ (No statistical controls.)
- A large study of Minneapolis/St. Paul area adolescents found that having more family meals was associated with less tobacco, alcohol, and marijuana use; higher grade point average; fewer depressive symptoms; and less risk for suicide. The findings held after the researchers statistically controlled for the level of family connectedness; in other words, family meals conveyed benefits beyond the teen's general sense of how close the family is. They also controlled for age, family structure, race, and social class.⁵
- Teens and parents alike believe in the value of family meals, with near universal agreement that it's important to eat at least one meal a day together. Most teens report enjoying eating meals with their family, and most believe they would eat more healthful foods if they ate more with the parents. Scheduling conflicts and conflict during meals were principal barriers in the minds of teens.⁸
- Regular family dinners and nutritional intake: A medical study of children ages 9-14 found that children who have more regular dinners with their families have more healthful dietary patterns, including more fruits and vegetables, less saturated and trans fat, fewer fried foods and sodas, and more vitamins and other micronutrients. (Findings were based on children's own reports of what they ate in the last 24 hours, and held up after statistical controls for household income, maternal employment, body mass index, physical activity, and other factors.)⁶
- Eating disorders: A Minnesota study found that college students with eating disorders had fewer family meals growing up.⁷

New Research on Benefits of Family Meals from the Barilla Survey²

- First evidence for adult benefits (all prior studies on children)
 - More frequent family dinners associated with higher life satisfaction in domains of relationships, mental and physical health, and sense of life achievement
 - Quality of family dinners (as measured by number of distractions) was associated with the same outcomes
 - Higher frequency and better quality associated with lower BMI (based on self-reported height and weight)
 - No statistical controls applied yet
- First evidence for weight problems in children related to frequency and quality of family meals
 - Parents were asked to report their view of the weight status of their youngest child: underweight, about the right weight, or overweight.
 - The percentage of children rated as overweight was nearly 2.5 times higher for families who had family meals less than 5 times per week and nearly 3 times greater for families with distractions at family meals.
 - Note: Parents greatly underestimate their children's weight problems; only 11% rated their child as being overweight.
 - No statistical controls applied yet.

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