

Focus on Family Meals

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5 a Day

Spending time with family and friends is important and needed. And yet, many of us don't slow down to enjoy each others' company, especially at meals. Even when we eat by ourselves, our cars and couches have become our dinner table.

Slowing down to share conversations and food with loved ones is an enjoyable thing to do. There are also many other benefits to eating together, including:

- Better communication. Families and friends that spend time together on a regular basis become involved in the day-to-day events of each other. It's a time (sometimes the only time) to check in with each other about not only the day's events but emotionally as well.
- Strong family bond. Each family member's sense of belonging is reinforced when meals are shared.
- Shared learning. We each benefit from sharing the new things we have learned throughout the day with those who are close to us.
- Improved nutrition. A recent study revealed that among families that eat meals together, the children ate more fruits, vegetables, and other nutritious foods and less junk food, including soda and fast food.
- More time together. We all need to eat, and in our busy lives this can be one of the best opportunities to share each others' company.

It's nice to know the benefits, but how do you make family meals happen? For some of us, eating meals with our roommates, significant others, spouses, and/or children seems like an impossible thing to do because of conflicting schedules or lack of time! Here are some steps you can take to make family mealtime fun and low stress.

1. Make "family meals" a priority. Eating meals together may not be possible everyday due to schedules and conflicts, but you can make it happen at least one more day than you are already doing.
2. In the absence of a family member, invite friends or another family that you are close with to share a potluck meal or dinner and game night. Try scheduling a weekly meal together to try a new recipe or share old favorites.
3. Be flexible about when and where you eat. Try a picnic lunch on the weekend, an early morning breakfast, or a new "family-style" restaurant on your way home in the evening. Eating together at your home, a restaurant, the beach or a park are all great places for family meals.
4. Keep meals simple and easy. You don't have to serve a 4 course meal! Ordering a pizza, take-out or reheating leftovers counts if you eat it together. Add a salad or side of veggies for a complete meal.
5. Get everyone involved in the preparation. Preparing the meal together gives you more time to spend as a family and "picky eaters" are more likely to eat what they help prepare.
6. Turn off the TV and radio! Eliminate noises and distractions. Family meals are a time to relax, unwind, enjoy being together, and to have a conversation.
7. Try a new conversation topic. Choose a question a night for everyone to answer, for example, "If you could travel anywhere in the world, where would you go and who would you take with you?" Another discussion starter can be sharing "highs" and

- “lows” of the day. Try letting each family member pick a topic so everyone gets involved!
8. Serve a variety of foods. Family meals are a great time to make healthy choices, and if you have children, demonstrate healthy eating habits. It's easy to include fruits and vegetables in family meals. Add red or bell peppers to stir fry, extra tomatoes to pasta, spinach to sandwiches and vegetables to pizza. For fruit and vegetable recipes, log onto www.sd5aday.org.