

## “Shared Meals” Fact Sheet

### What the research says:

- A majority of parents feel that family meals are very important.
- Between 40 percent and 47 percent of families report eating at least one meal together on most days, usually dinner.
- Actual time spent eating together is brief – on average, 18-20 minutes, or around 100 to 120 minutes of family time per week.
- Frequency of family meals is positively associated with intake of fruits, vegetables, grains and dairy, and negatively associated with soft drink consumption (Gilman et al 2002).
- Outcomes associated with family meals include risk reduction, achievement of developmental milestones, and overall health.
- Opportunity to teach table manners, social skills, family values, a sense of community and basic cooking skills (Steiner et al. 1996).
- The presence or absence of television during a meal is significantly related to child health and well-being.
- Youth who have regular family meals get better grades, are more motivated at school and get along better with others, while those who eat less frequently were more likely to use drugs or display depression (Tufts 1997, Esienberg et al 2004).
- Eating together reduces risk for being overweight, especially in families with an authoritative or restrictive parenting style (Forthun 2008).

### Benefits of shared and family meals:

- Improved academic skills
  - Improved vocabulary and reading skills
  - Improved achievement test scores
  - Greater academic achievement and higher grades
- Stronger family bonds and emotional health
- Decreased risk-taking behaviors
  - Less likely to smoke cigarettes
  - Less likely to use drugs or alcohol
  - Less likely to feel depressed or get into trouble
- Shared learning
  - Practice social skills (including table manners)
  - Improved vocabulary and conversation skills
- Improved nutrition
  - Greater intake of healthy foods
  - Decreased intake of sugar-sweetened beverages
  - Less disordered eating
  - May reduce risk for being overweight

### Barriers to family meals:



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- Parent schedules – many parents work different schedules or work late.
- Child schedules – scheduled activities often interfere with dinner time.
- Preparation time – faster to eat out than prepare a meal at home.
- Shopping time.
- Knowledge and skills around meal preparation.

**Overcoming barriers to family meals:**

- Make mealtime a priority: plan ahead when you will eat together.
- Be creative and flexible about when and where you eat together.
- Make mealtime a pleasant and stress free time – talk about fun and happy things.
- Turn off the TV & cell phones.
- Keep meals simple and easy.
- Involve everyone in preparation of the meal.
- Encourage children to try foods but don't lecture or force your child to eat.
- Invite others to join you for a meal.

**Campaign slogans from around the country:**

- Eat together, eat better. (Washington State campaign)
- Set the table for the family, set roots for a lifetime. (Washington State)
- Cook together, talk together, celebrate together.
- Cook together, eat together, talk together. Make mealtime a family time. (FNS Core Message)
- Cook together, eat together, talk together. Make mealtime a together time.
- Say “yes” to family meals. (Iowa State Extension)
- Make mealtime family time. (Purdue University Extension)



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