

HEALTH AT A GLANCE



Making Time for Family Meals

How often do you eat together as a family? Children and teens who have regular family meals often have better nutrition habits and are less likely to be overweight. The benefits don't stop there: these youth tend to do better in school, have closer bonds with their family, and report higher self esteem. They are less likely to use alcohol or drugs, have behavioral problems, experience depression, have an eating disorder or face teenage pregnancy.

Mealtime Tips

Use these simple strategies to help you make family mealtime a success:

- **Start small.** Increase the number of family meals by one meal per week until you are having at least three to five meals together.
- **Branch out.** To plan more family meals, look over your calendar and choose times when everyone can be there. If it's tough to make dinner work, substitute breakfast, lunch or evening snacks—all of these count!
- **Encourage your kids to help with meal planning and preparation.** Children will often eat foods they help plan and prepare. Ask for input about meals or let your child choose a few vegetables at the store. For preparation, preschool and elementary kids can set the table, fold napkins, or measure ingredients; older kids can help mix ingredients, wash produce, or serve food, while teens can be assigned a meal to help you cook.
- **Be a good food role model.** Children often imitate their parents' attitudes and behaviors related to food, so they will perceive healthy eating as important if they see you doing it.
- **Let kids stop eating when they say they're full.** Encourage your child to eat slowly and pay attention to feeling full. By learning hunger and fullness cues, your child will learn to eat enough, but not overeat, which will help them with weight control.
- **Eliminate outside distractions.** The beneficial effects of family meals are thwarted by watching T.V. and using cell phones. Unplug from your devices, eat around a table and make an effort to enjoy your time together.

Tips to Get Meals on the Table Quickly

Use these time-saving tips to whip up a healthy family meal in minutes:

- **Have a plan.** Take a few minutes each week to create a meal plan, and then make a shopping list based off of the menu. This will save you time and energy later in the week.
- **Keep your kitchen stocked.** Have healthy non-perishable meal staples on hand so you can put a healthy meal together anytime. Great ideas include frozen pre-cooked shrimp and unbreaded fish fillets, lean ground beef and chicken breast (freeze until ready to use), water-packed tuna, whole wheat pasta, brown rice, no-salt added canned beans, frozen vegetables, canned fruit (in its own juice) and unsweetened frozen fruit.
- **Prep ahead.** When you have extra time, do a little prep work to save cooking time later. For example, wash and chop fresh fruit and veggies, cook rice, pasta or ground beef for meals later in the week (refrigerate until ready to use), or make a casserole and freeze it.
- **Reinvent leftovers.** When preparing dinner, cook extra meat for another meal within the next few days. For example, if you make pork tenderloin on Monday, save the extras for pulled pork sandwiches on Wednesday. Or, grill extra chicken breasts: the first night, serve half as a main entree, then use the extra chicken the next evening in fajitas.
- **Make the most of your slow cooker.** Combine recipe ingredients in a slow cooker in the morning, and dinner will be waiting for you when you get home!

Key Websites:

Recipe and meal ideas: www.healthyeating.org

Family mealtime tips: www.poweroffamilymeals.com

