



Family Habits: Family Mealtimes

Eating together as a family is a great way to help children and young people manage their weight. Research shows that people tend to eat less during family meals because they eat more slowly and talk more; however with today's busy lifestyle family mealtimes can be a challenge. It is worth making the effort though due to the health, social, and emotional wellbeing benefits of eating with others.

Here are some tips, strategies and benefits to help you get started

Tip 1: Schedule time to eat together

- Eating together can happen at breakfast, lunch or dinner. Choose the meal time that gives you the most time to talk and connect.
- If you don't usually eat together, start with small steps. Increase the number of family meals by one extra meal a week.
- Try to schedule activities so that they don't interfere with mealtimes.
- For many busy families, mealtimes can be a great time to catch up on everyone's news and share what you have been up to.

Tip: Once you decide what meal you are going to eat together, mark it on your calendar like you would any other event. If you have a plan, it is more likely to happen.

Tip 2: Everyone can help plan & prepare meals

- Eating together is more likely to happen when everyone helps.
- As a family, plan a menu for the week and make a grocery list.
- Let the kids be involved. Let them help prepare food or set the table.
- Children enjoy cooking and it's a great way to get talking about new foods together. Some children are more likely to eat the foods they help you to prepare.
- Work as a family to clean up afterwards.
- Cooking together is a great way to connect with each other and have fun!

Tip: If you're not confident in the kitchen, choose simple and familiar recipes. This will help you enjoy your time together instead of trying to figure out the next step in the recipe.

Tip 3: Make mealtimes about being together

- Eating together provides a time to be connected. This helps children feel loved, safe and secure.
- Sitting at a dining table allows your child to be part of the group and enjoy the social benefits of eating together
- Focus on the importance of being together as a family more than on making an elaborate meal or on what or how much each child is eating.
- Use meal times to teach children about family values and traditions.
- Keep mealtime conversations positive, save difficult or disciplinary conversations for some time other than meal times.

- Encourage children to talk about their day. This helps to develop more communication between family members.

Tip: Turn off distractions like the TV, computer, tablets and phones during mealtimes. Keep toys and books off the table.

Tip 4: Model positive eating behaviour

- Family meals offer parents a chance to be role models. They can set an example of healthy eating and polite table manners. You are an important role model for trying new foods, and enjoying mealtimes. Children and young people are more likely to eat foods their parents and family also enjoy eating.
- Make offering new foods part of your regular mealtime routine. Children often need to see, smell, and touch a food many times before trying it. Offer new foods with familiar foods and include foods your child has refused in the past.
- Not everyone likes every food, and that's okay. Encourage kids to say "no, thank you," or teach them what you would like them to do or say if they don't want to eat something.
- Trust children to show or tell you how much they want to eat and when they are finished eating. An important part of healthy eating is learning to stop when they are full. Being forced or pressured to finish food can make your child ignore their internal hunger and fullness cues.
- Try not to rush children through a meal. Children often take longer to eat than adults. Remind children to eat slowly, chew their food well and enjoy what they are eating.

Tip 5: Health and social benefits of eating together

- People of all ages eat better when they share a meal with others. They tend to eat more fruits and vegetables and other nutrient-rich foods. They also drink less fizzy drinks and eat less fried foods.
- Studies show families who have regular meals at the table with no distractions (such as television) are more likely to be a healthy weight.
- Eating together gives young children the chance to learn to communicate better.
- Healthier eating into adulthood promotes a healthier body weight, lowers risk of disordered eating, lowers use of cigarettes, drugs and alcohol, fewer behaviour problems, better self-esteem, less depression, and better achievement at school.

Tip 6: More economical

- Cooked meals at home for the entire family is more economical compared to eating out.
- Batch cooking can save time and money.
- Eating home cooked meals along with your family is not only good for your health but also helps save money.

Sources:

- <https://www.nhsggc.org.uk/kids/resources/ot-activityinformation-sheets>
- <https://www.justonenorfolk.nhs.uk/healthylifestyles/eat-better/eating-well>
- www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthy-eating/eating-together
- www.fcconline.org/blog/the-importance-of-family-mealtime/
- <https://www.hct.nhs.uk/your-health/keeping-healthy/childrens-health/>