

Total Nutrition

Bring Back the Family Meal

(NAPSA)—What goes around comes around. Witness bellbottoms, the VW Beetle, the PT Cruiser, and the revival of bands such as Kiss. Health experts are hoping one more item makes a comeback—family meals.

For years, Americans have led a grab-and-go lifestyle—breakfast, lunch and/or dinner on the fly. And, when we're not dashing through dining, we're chewing while viewing (as in TV). The sit-down, face-to-face family dinner is on the endangered list. But new research suggests it's worth saving. Families who eat together have healthy advantages over families who don't.

More vitamins and minerals, less fat.

A study of more than 16,000 children between the ages of nine and 14 found that those who ate dinner with their family ate more fruits and vegetables and less fat, soda and fried foods compared to those who missed out on family meals. Children also consumed more of the recommended amount of fiber, folic acid, calcium, iron, and vitamins B, C, and E in their diets when they ate with their families. Researchers believe part of the positive results may be attributed to the fact that family dinners tend to contain more healthful foods than meals children would otherwise choose to eat. It also is possible that kids learn about healthful eating during family mealtimes—either through table talk or cues from their parents.

Better eating habits, fewer weight problems.

A study of 91 families in the Washington, D.C. area found that children who consumed their meals while watching TV ate more red meat and salty snacks and had twice the amount of caffeine in their diets than kids who ate meals without the television on. They also were more likely to be overweight. Some studies have

Benefits Beyond Health

- Builds a stronger family bond
- Enhances communication between parents and kids
- Offers opportunities for teaching
- Offers opportunities for listening and learning



suggested that cutting back on television time can help curb obesity in children. The rationale for these findings varies. Television viewing may trigger mindless snacking. Some believe that kids may not pay attention to what and how much they eat when they watch TV. Family meals provide an opportunity to shape healthy eating habits that could last a lifetime.

What to do?

For starters, experts say, turn off the television. Let the answering machine or voicemail take phone messages during mealtime so the focus of the meal is on being together. Work meals around family schedules. At the start of the week, determine when everyone will be available. Be creative and flexible when planning meals. Consider packing a picnic for the crew to eat at the soccer or baseball field before or after practice. Start a new tradition of weekend breakfasts or brunches. Involve the entire family and try to make eating together a priority.

A Great Start Toward Total Nutrition—Have everyone get involved in making family meals a reality. If possible, take turns with meal chores—planning, preparing the meal, and cleanup. Put someone on planning, someone else on preparation and another person on cleanup. Many hands make light work, strengthen family bonds and generate fun.

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