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Seven research-backed tips to make the most of family meals, no matter how often they happen

By **Cara Rosenbloom**

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As a dietitian, I often field concerns from parents who struggle to make time for family meals. Parents know shared meals are beneficial for kids and are linked to improved nutrition and better grades. But family meals can be difficult to schedule during time-crunched days when we're balancing work, school, kids' lessons and an empty fridge. Many flustered folks end up ordering a pizza and feeling guilty about letting their family down. As a working mom, I fall into the same trap.

This pattern is cruelly and gratuitously deflating for busy parents, who are trying their best. I spoke to some researchers to find out what aspects of family meals parents should focus on to reap the most benefit — even when there's little time. I learned that *how* family members eat together is even more important than how often they eat together. Your kids can benefit from family meals if you keep the following seven research-backed points in mind.

Every meal together counts. It's totally fine if you can't share family meals daily. Jerica Berge, a professor in the Department of Family Medicine and Community Health at the University of Minnesota Medical School, found that most American families across many cultures eat together three times per week on average. "My study population is highly diverse, with African American, Native American, Hispanic, immigrant/refugee groups and white families," she says.

Her research showed that sharing just two family meals a week is also enough to reap benefits for children, such as a healthy dietary intake, fewer disordered eating behaviors, greater family connectedness, higher academic success, lower risk of substance abuse and better communication skills.

Researchers Mattea Dallacker, Jutta Mata and Ralph Hertwig from the Max Planck Institute for Human Development and the University of Mannheim, both in Germany, recently co-wrote a meta-analysis on the components of healthy family meals. They found that there is no magic number in regard to how often family meals must take place to be beneficial. "Even one family meal per week can have beneficial effects," they say. "They are likely to be smaller effects than if family meals occur more often — but small effects can add up over time." So do what you can and discard the guilt.

Two people are enough for a family meal. It's not always possible to get the entire family together when everyone is busy, but Dallacker's team says that as long as there are two family members eating together, it counts as a family meal and can provide benefits. They also found that family meals can take place everywhere — at home, in a restaurant and even in the kitchen of a parent's employer.

Breakfast and lunch work, too. Research shows breakfast and lunch are also opportune times for family meals; parents can model the same healthy skills at any daily repast. That opens up 21 opportunities each week instead of just seven dinners, and it really takes the pressure off. Maybe your schedule is better suited to one family dinner per week, plus a weekday breakfast and brunch on Sunday. Whatever works!

Meals don't have to be ultra-healthy. While nutritious and balanced meals are always the gold standard when parents are trying to model healthy eating, any meal counts — even one that takes just minutes to make. “My research has shown that family meals are more doable than people think,” Berge says. “If families have a mix of fresh food and pre-prepared food — perhaps a fresh salad with a frozen pizza — we have found that to be good enough with regard to health benefits compared to a meal made from scratch.”

It's great to prepare together. Kids gain essential life skills from being part of the process, which can include grocery shopping, food prep, cooking, setting the table and cleaning up. Studies conducted by Dallacker's team show that children eat more healthily when they are involved in preparing the shared food.

Try to keep things positive. Family meals are not the right time for arguments. Ideally, shared meals should be used as a time to catch up and enjoy one another's company.

“We found that a positive mealtime atmosphere is associated with healthier eating in children,” Dallacker’s team says. They explain that positive family meals provide structure and a supportive emotional climate, which promotes family cohesion and health in all family members — not only the children. “Research on family meals identified benefits that go beyond nutritional health, such as a lower risk of depression, higher self-esteem and greater sense of resilience,” the researchers say.

Turn off the TV. There are many benefits from the behavioral components of family meals. Turning the TV off, carving out meal time and enjoying shared company are all big wins. “Eating in the living room while watching TV makes unhealthy eating behavior more likely,” Dallacker’s team says. Their recent meta-analysis showed that turning off the TV was significantly associated with better nutritional health and improving the family bond. You can eat together every night of the week, but if the TV is on and no one is communicating, it has less value.

My kids have lessons on Sundays, Mondays and Wednesdays, so those meals are an ever-changing kaleidoscope of people and ingredients. Some are family meals, and some just can’t be — and I’m finally okay with that. Taco Tuesday is when my kids help me cook, and Friday is dinner with Grandpa. And on Saturdays, we order in together. Our family dinners don’t always match the ideal that’s been pushed on parents, but I’ve realized that how we eat together — the TV is off, phone are banned and communication is open — is more important than how often.

Registered dietitian Cara Rosenbloom is president of Words to Eat By, a nutrition communications company specializing in writing, nutrition education and recipe development. She is the co-author of “Nourish: Whole Food Recipes Featuring Seeds, Nuts and Beans.”

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