



# Nutrition for Family Living

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## November, 2007 Topics

Kudos for family meals and turning off the TV

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## Kudos for family meals and turning off the TV

By Susan Nitzke

A newly published study by Nicole Larson and others from the University of Minnesota shows that teens who eat meals with their families are more likely to make good food choices as they become young adults. Larson's research group obtained food frequency questionnaires and surveys from 946 female students and 764 male high school students in 1998-99 and in 2003-04. Young adults who ate family meals more frequently during adolescence had higher intakes of fruit, vegetables, dark-green and orange vegetables and lower intakes of soft drinks than those who had eaten family meals less frequently. For the young women in this study, family meals in adolescence were associated with greater breakfast frequency.

A review article in the same issue of this journal reported that family meals tend to decline as children get older and that teens and parents in families that had fewer family dinners (<3 times per week) wished they had more family dinners. Boys eat family dinners more often than girls and family dinners are more frequent in homes with higher socioeconomic status.

The research team from Minnesota also published an article this month on watching TV during family meals. They noted that increasing TV viewing had been associated with increased caloric intake and decreased diet quality for children and teens. Specifically, Feldman and colleagues asked two research questions "is watching TV during family meals associated with adolescents' dietary intake?" and "is watching TV during family meals associated with better dietary intake compared to not eating regular family meals?" This was a sub-study from an adolescent nutrition study known as *Project EAT*. They asked 4746 adolescents from the Minneapolis-St. Paul area about their family meals, TV viewing during dinner. In addition, they used a questionnaire to determine the teens' daily calorie intakes and their daily servings of fruit, vegetables, calcium-rich foods, grains, soft drinks, fried food, and snack food. About 2/3 of the adolescents said they ate regular family meals (3 or more in the previous week). Adolescents who watched TV during family meals (about half of the family meal eaters) were more likely to have poorer diet quality (less vegetables, grains and dairy food and more soft drinks and fried food) than adolescents who ate family meals while watching TV. Adolescents who ate regular family meals while watching TV had better quality diets than adolescents not eating regular family meals. They acknowledged that in some family situations, TV may be a buffer between family members and unpleasant conversations that may otherwise take place. They concluded that even with the TV on, eating as a family appears to be beneficial.

*Implications for Extension Educators.* Family meals are a time for parents to model healthy eating behaviors and help their children develop favorable food preferences and habits, especially if they turn off the TV and share healthful foods and positive family interactions at those meals. Larson's study and others show that parents' efforts to make time for family meals are worthwhile because dietary patterns formed in childhood tend to affect food choices in later life. Supporting busy parents and guiding them through planning and problem-solving activities aimed at more frequent family meals can be worthwhile aspects of nutrition education.



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NOTE: A companion press release on this topic is included in the UWEX Family Living news packet for November 2007.

### References

Larson NI, Neumark-Sztainer D, Hannan PJ, Story M. Family meals during adolescence are associated with higher diet quality and healthful meal patterns during young adulthood. *J Am Diet Assoc.* 2007;107:1502-1510.

Rockett HRH. Family dinner: More than just a meal. *J Am Diet Assoc.* 2007;107:1498-1501.

Feldman S, Eisenberg ME, Neumark-Sztainer D, Story M. Associations between watching TV during family meals and dietary intake among adolescents. *J Nutr Educ Behav.* 2007;39:257-263. (This article was discussed in a New York Times article: "The family meal is what counts, TV on or off" <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/16/health/16well.html?ref=fitnessandnutrition>)

### Supportive lessons and displays (mainly for parents and families with younger children)

*Say YES to family meals.*

[http://www.uwex.edu/ces/wnep/tch\\_res/res\\_detail.cfm?resource\\_id=354](http://www.uwex.edu/ces/wnep/tch_res/res_detail.cfm?resource_id=354)

*Family mealtimes: Take a new look.*

[http://www.uwex.edu/ces/wnep/tch\\_res/res\\_detail.cfm?resource\\_id=355](http://www.uwex.edu/ces/wnep/tch_res/res_detail.cfm?resource_id=355)

*Family mealtimes* flip chart developed by St. Croix and Polk county WNEP and WIC.

[http://www.uwex.edu/ces/wnep/tch\\_res/res\\_detail.cfm?resource\\_id=381](http://www.uwex.edu/ces/wnep/tch_res/res_detail.cfm?resource_id=381)

*Family mealtime should be... enjoyable and pleasant* (English and Spanish) developed by Calumet/Outagamie/Winnegabo WNEP.

[http://www.uwex.edu/ces/wnep/tch\\_res/res\\_detail.cfm?resource\\_id=353](http://www.uwex.edu/ces/wnep/tch_res/res_detail.cfm?resource_id=353)

*Enjoying the Family Meal and Family Meals – Fast, Healthful!* part of the Nibbles for Health series, <http://teamnnutrition.usda.gov/Resources/nibbles.html>.