



A n u t r i t i o n F a c t S h e e t



10 Tips for Quality Family Meals

Sitting down to eat a meal with your family is a great way to catch up and spend quality time with each other. Family meals can also reinforce a healthy relationship with food. Here are some ideas for building family traditions, improving nutrition, and reducing stress.

1. Start Slow, Learn as You Go

If you don't eat any meals together now, just add one meal a week. Families usually report enjoying eating meals together after they try it. Breakfast, lunch, or dinner can be family meals.

2. It's Not 'What' But 'How' You Feed Your Family

Simple foods served with love and laughter will outshine gourmet food.

3. It Doesn't Have to Be Hot

Cold sandwiches, apples, and milk can be just as healthy as hot food you worked for hours to prepare.

4. Involve Children in Making Meals

Children, especially younger children, enjoy meals they help fix. If everyone is hungry and in a hurry when they get home, try preparing meals on the weekend. Or, prepare something for the next day AFTER the meal.

5. Food Choice vs. Forcing Food

Serious family conflicts occur between parents and children when children are forced to eat. A parent's role is to offer a child safe, healthful food. Offer food on a regular schedule (every two hours for young children). A child's role is to decide to eat the food or not and how much to eat. If a child does not eat the food in a reasonable amount of time, take the food away.

6. Cook it Quick but Eat It Slow

Though you may hurry meal preparation time, allow ample time to enjoy the meal with your family.

7. Table Talk Tips

Share positive things that have happened during the day. Perhaps start a mealtime ritual where everyone tells one new thing they learned that day – including mom and dad!

Some families assign a topic to mealtime conversations. Here are some popular ideas:

- Describe something that happened recently which made you feel really happy.
- Someone gave you \$1,000. You have to spend some of it on your family before you can buy anything for yourself. What would you buy for everyone?
- If you could live in a different time and place, where and when would you want to live?
- If you could spend an afternoon with a famous person (living or dead) who is your pick?

If everyone in your family talks at once, take a tip from the Winnetka Alliance for Early Childhood. They suggest borrowing the 'talking stick' idea from Native Americans. Only the person holding the stick can talk. You might have a 'talking cup' or other special item that gets passed around.

8. Don't Answer Phones at Meals

How often does a phone call interrupt your meals? If you can't stand to ignore a ringing phone, turn off the ringer, use voice mail, or tell people you will call back after dinner.

9. Turn the TV Off

Encourage family members to star in their own lives and relate to each other, rather than to an image on the TV screen. Record any "absolutely must see" shows that occur during dinnertime.

10. Make Mealtimes Matter

Mealtimes are a great time to catch up on family members' lives and show your family you care about them.

Ten Tips was adapted from Anne Henneman, R.C., University of Nebraska, Cooperative Extension. Produced by the Nutrition Education Network of Washington, Washington State University, and the U. S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service.

Make Physical Activity a Part of Your Family's Routine

Being physically active as a family before or after dinner can be an enjoyable part of a family's routine.

- Play tag, swim, toss a ball, jump rope, hula hoop, dance to music, or play a dancing video game.
- Walk the dog, go for a jog, go on a bike ride, or head to the playground.
- Celebrate special occasions – like birthdays or anniversaries – with something active, such as a hike, volleyball or soccer game, or playing Frisbee at the park.
- Get the whole family involved in household chores like cleaning, vacuuming, and yard work.
- Walk around the block after a meal.
- Make a new house rule: No sitting during television commercials.

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Before Dinner, the Poison Hour

When everyone is tired and hungry, family arguments can explode! Head off difficulties:

- Give hungry children a small snack to hold them until dinner. Bread, fruit, vegetables, or a glass of milk are nourishing.
- Have children help with dinner preparation. Have them help set the table or make simple dishes.
- Give a five minute warning for dinner. Alert everyone that dinner is almost ready. Tell them it is time to wash up for dinner.

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