

Eating meals together as a family can be fun. Check Your Health suggests that families sit down at the dinner table and eat together at least one night each week. Sharing a meal is a great opportunity for family members to learn more about each other simply by talking together. Encourage friendly conversation at the table, by:

- Gathering everyone together to sit at the table for meals.
- Turning off the TV.
- Avoiding distractions, such as newspapers, telephones, and toys.
- Making mealtime pleasant by encouraging positive conversation. Try not to use this as a time to scold or punish your kids.

Families that eat together eat healthier meals and cooking larger quantities family makes better use of food supplies. Other benefits of eating together include improved family communication and an increased sense of security and stability for children. Therefore, children behave better and perform better in school. They also develop a sense of family traditions and values, and also learn while helping to prepare meals.

Helpful Hints on Planning and Preparing Family Mealtime

Talk with family members about how to set up your family mealtime. You might want to discuss the following questions:

- *What do we like to eat?*
- *What time is best?*
- *What kinds of things can we talk about? What should we not talk about?*
- *What behavior is okay? What is not?*

Plan family dinner menus in advance (a week, a pay period, a month, etc). This will save time and avoid costly last-minute dinners out or orders for pizza. When planning, don't try to do it all at once—start with one meal a week and add more as you can. Take time to make that meal extra special!

Family mealtime rules are important. Make rules that are clear and simple. If children understand the rules, it is easier for them to follow. Some family mealtime rules could be:

- Wash your hands before you eat.
- No eating until everyone is at the table.
- If you do not like a food, still be kind.
- Ask before you get up from the table.

Mealtime Fun

Keep foods on hand for two or three quick recipes for when you're short on time. For those evenings when you have more time, try making larger amounts of your recipe and freezing the rest for later. Family meals do not have to be complicated. Simple foods will do!

Mealtime Activity Suggestions

- *Restaurant Night.* Pretend you are at a restaurant and give every family member a role to play (example: one person takes orders, one person serves the food, etc.) Turn the lights off and eat by candlelight or put flowers on the table.
- *Have alphabet dinners.* For example, on "A" night feature asparagus, apples or avocado. Family members will learn about new foods.
- *Geography Night.* Pick a country to learn about and prepare foods that come from that country. Have each person learn one fact about the country to share at dinnertime.
- *Special Spotlight.* Choose a family member to be in the spotlight. Have a special plate that the very important person (VIP) uses when they are in the spotlight. Let the VIP choose the menu.
- *Game Night.* Make individual pizzas using English muffins for dinner and play a game. Then, take turns choosing the game.
- *Family Breakfast.* Dinner isn't the only time to share meals. Breakfast is also a great time to sit down together and start the day out right!

More Helpful Hints About Family Mealtime

- Involve the whole family. When children are allowed to participate in meal planning, preparing, serving and cleaning up, they often care more about it.
- Allow children to make menu choices. Take your child food shopping with you. Let your child choose vegetables or fruits for the meal.
- When preparing the meal, give your child a specific task like setting the table or putting bread on a plate. Let children know five minutes before dinner is ready so they can finish what they are doing.
- Teach children that cleaning up after a meal is just as important as preparing it. Involve the entire family in the clean up by making a chore chart and taking turns. Try listening to music to make clean-up go faster.
- Kids need instruction to make their way around the kitchen successfully. Take time to teach your child basic skills like reading recipes, setting up equipment, using tools like measuring utensils and can openers, and demonstrating how to prepare a variety of foods.
- Enjoy yourself in the kitchen. Approach cooking as a creative and fun activity and your child will find cooking to be fun as well.

- Uncover your child's kitchen talents. A child that likes art may enjoy arranging fresh fruit on a tray while a math whiz might quickly calculate recipe measurements.
- Assign tasks according to your child's age and development. Preschoolers love to measure, pour and stir. Older children can learn how to safely use equipment such as can openers, knives, blenders and the microwave.
- Declare "Kids Rule!" one night a week. Once kids have grasped basic cooking skills, put them in charge of planning and preparing the evening meal. Challenge older kids to be kitchen daredevils. Allow them to experiment with different food combinations and cooking techniques. Remember to praise more than criticize if you want them to keep cooking.

Teaching Kids About Nutrition

Healthful eating provides fuel for learning, growing, sports and play. What makes a food "healthful?" Healthful foods supply important nutrients, such as protein, vitamins, minerals and fiber. A wide variety of healthful foods are found in these five food groups:

- Breads, cereal, rice and pasta
- Vegetables
- Fruit
- Milk, yogurt and cheese
- Meat, poultry, fish, eggs, beans and nuts.

Limit foods such as soft drinks and candy that supply a lot of calories but few nutrients. Try to go easy on higher-fat foods from the food groups, too, such as French fries, chips and cake.

Kids need to be taught about healthful eating. Teach them why the following guidelines are important.



Mealtime Fun

- Eat a variety of foods. Prepare family meals and snacks with different foods from the five food groups.
- Choose plenty of grain products, fruits and vegetables. Have kids add their favorites to the shopping list - then serve them for meals and snacks.
- Limit foods with fat, cholesterol, sugar and sodium. Teach kids to read Nutritional Facts on food labels to help them find foods with less fat, cholesterol, sugar and sodium.
- Balance food choices with physical activity. Encourage your kids to move more.
- Eat breakfast. Have your kids help plan breakfast with nutritious foods they like.
- Snack smart. Keep healthful, easy-to-make and easy-to-eat foods on hand for everyone to snack on! See Chapter 4 “Healthy snacking” for more ideas.

