

# Family Mealtime

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**Families who eat meals together tend to eat healthier foods, talk to one another and share family traditions. This MontGuide includes some benefits of family mealtimes plus easy ways to get started and get organized—even if your schedules are tough to coordinate.**



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## DO YOU EVER WISH YOUR FAMILY COULD SLOW

down long enough to all be at home at the same time? Why not organize a family mealtime into your routine?

The idea of gathering the family together in the same place at the same time in the 21st century may seem impossible for many, but it can be done. Eating together as a family these days may not look like Sunday dinners of a generation ago. However, the goal can still be the same. Family mealtime provides an opportunity to spend time with family members

and talk with one another. Eating meals together can help families feel closer and provide better nutrition – two ingredients for happy, healthy families.

Family members today often have varied schedules which can make it challenging to eat dinner together. Family mealtimes do not need to be evening meals. Perhaps your family is more likely to be together at lunch – or even breakfast.



## Advantages of family mealtime

Families who spend mealtimes together reap numerous benefits. Family members tend to eat better if they are gathered together, which can generally be attributed to improved meal planning. In addition, eating together offers:

### *A time to be together*

Families today come in a variety of forms: two-parent, single-parent, stepfamilies, grandparents raising grandchildren, and families where the parents are cohabitating. In the majority of families today, the parents work outside the home. Additionally, many teens have jobs after school. It is difficult for families to find time to spend together, and family mealtime is a perfect opportunity to draw the family together. Everyone needs to eat!

In healthy families, family members have opportunities to assert their individuality as well as to be together and connected to the family. Spending time together helps a family build closeness and a sense of belonging to a special group.

### *A chance to talk to one another*

Have you ever felt that the communication in your family consists of “hello,” “goodbye” and notes to one another? This happens

a great deal in families today with busy work and activity schedules. Family mealtime can provide an opportunity for all family members to be together and share what is happening. Use family mealtime as a chance to have pleasant conversation. Save those tough conversations for another time. Have a rule that if disagreements start during a family meal, the family members will set aside another time to deal with the issue.

### *A time to build family traditions*

Rituals and traditions are an important part of building a strong healthy family. Mealtime can be an opportunity to develop family traditions. Some families have a “spaghetti night” or some other favorite dish on a specific day. Others have a “feed for yourself night” where the family eats leftovers and snacks, but the family eats together. Traditions need not be elaborate to have meaning for family members. Rituals and traditions help the family know that they belong to a special caring group.

### *A way to learn about your heritage*

Every family develops patterns of how they operate as a family group. These patterns are passed down from generation to generation. They are based on our culture and what we value. Knowing about our heritage helps us to understand our family. Our cultural and ethnic background also contributes to the uniqueness of our family. Family mealtime can provide a setting for teaching your children about their heritage.

One mother shared her experiences of family dinners from her youth. Her father always put on a suit jacket for dinner. In her strict British family, formality at dinnertime was expected. You may discover that a favorite recipe that has been handed down through the generations in your family is related to your ethnic background.

### *A time for parents to model good habits*

Parents are the first teachers of children. Children learn a great deal from their parents about social manners, how to communicate and healthy eating habits. Family mealtime can be an opportunity for parents to model appropriate table manners, healthy food choices and good listening skills. Children get the opportunity to practice these skills, which will be important throughout their lives.

### **Nutritional and healthy eating behaviors**

Family mealtime contributes an array of nutritional benefits to families, including better overall nutrition and helping youth learn important eating skills that will promote health and prevent behaviors common in overweight people.

### *Nutritional advantages*

The nutritional advantages for children in family mealtime are significant. Children who eat family meals consume less soda and high-fat snacks, and eat more fruits and vegetables and a larger variety of foods, which adds an important array of nutrients. Overall, children have more nutritious food choices when eating family meals.

Instead of a series of higher-fat and lower nutrition snacks throughout the evening, everyone benefits from a balanced meal, with all the emotional satisfaction of eating, one of our greatest pleasures.

**To get started** on creating family mealtime with a quick, easy-to-fix recipe, that can be used in several ways try the following “Quick Chili” recipe. For variations try using the chili in:

- Tacos for dinner
- Macaroni and cheese for a snack
- Tortillas and eggs for a breakfast burrito
- Taco salad for lunch
- Baked potatoes for a quick meal to go

### **Quick Chili** (USDA Home and Garden Bulletin No. 232-10)

Preparation Time – Active: 10 minutes Total: 20 minutes

4 servings, about ¾ cup each

Per Serving – Calories: 230 Cholesterol: 34 milligrams  
Total fat: 9 grams Sodium: 390 milligrams Saturated fatty acids : 3 grams

½ pound	Lean ground beef
15½ oz. can	Kidney beans, drained (save liquid)
1/3 cup	Bean liquid
1 cup	“No-salt added” canned tomato puree
1 tablespoon	Instant minced onion
1½ tablespoons	Chili powder

1. Cook beef in hot fry pan until lightly browned. Drain off fat.
2. Stir in remaining ingredients.
3. Bring to a boil. Reduce heat, cover, and simmer 10 minutes.

Menu Suggestion: Serve with mixed salad greens with reduced-calorie dressing, whole-wheat rolls and juice-pack canned pineapple chunks.

### *Learning healthy eating habits*

Learning healthy eating habits and skills is another significant benefit for youth who share meals with their families. Healthy eating habits, such as eating when hungry and stopping when full, are some of the most important skills youth can learn during family meals. Eating when hungry and stopping when full teaches internal regulation of food intake, which is easier to learn when young than when an adult. If people rely on external regulation of food such as time, food ads or super-size food portions, it is very easy to eat too many calories and gain weight.

Another important eating habit is learning to eat a variety of healthy foods. With the convenience of fast foods, it is easy for youth and adults to prefer higher fat, salt, sugar and caloric foods. By offering healthy food choices at meals, youth learn to accept the taste of healthier foods and are more willing to choose these foods as they grow.

Trying and accepting new foods is another important developmental eating behavior for youth. Children commonly need about seven tries at eating a new food before they accept the new food. Experts no longer recommend “cleaning your plate” for children, but rather that adults insist the child try all foods on his or her plate, even if it amounts to just two forkfuls.

### ***Begin with the 30-minute plan for the week***

Organizing a family meal may seem complicated or time-consuming, but if you spend a half hour once a week on planning meals, you will actually save time otherwise spent in multiple trips to the grocery store. The end of a busy day may not be the best time to plan and cook a family meal! With a plan, you could do a whole week’s shopping in one trip.

Use convenience foods in one or several steps while preparing the meal so your time is spent eating and sharing rather than cooking or shopping. Sometimes, family meal night could mean ordering a pizza and preparing just a salad. Or the family meal could be thawing out lasagna you made last weekend or preparing the fastest meal you know how to make – like stir fry or spaghetti.

If schedules do not coincide for an evening meal, maybe the family would enjoy gathering for dessert or a bedtime snack. Compare schedules, and then pick a night at a specific time. Make it clear you expect everyone to keep his or her schedule clear for at least an hour that night. Turn off the TV. Let every family member help make the meal, which not only makes it easier for you but helps each of them develop food preparation skills they will use forever.

When your gathering will include friends or relatives, remember to keep it simple; that is the key to enjoying more family meals. Have relatives bring one or two items, making the meal easier for you and them. Remind them that the food does not have to be gourmet or from scratch, just shared.

### **Begin by adding one more family meal this week**

#### ***Choose a meal that’s fun***

Have you thought about breakfast for dinner? Serve your favorite breakfast foods in the evening. Or conjure up fun breakfast foods you don’t have very often. How about waffle pizza (toaster waffles spread with yogurt and fruit), breakfast burritos (scrambled eggs, green or red pepper chunks and ham bits in a tortilla), or a great seasonal fruit salad with a splash of orange juice and ginger or cinnamon?

#### ***Choose a meal that’s quick***

Be creative with tasty box meals for your family. Start with a box of macaroni and cheese, rice or other grain mix. Add a little precooked chicken or leftover beef or beans. Or try tuna or salmon from a can. Be generous with adding fresh, frozen or canned vegetables. Use the sauce mix included in the box (or part of it), or use your own combination of herbs, spices or sauces. Recipes aren’t necessary, but be sure to write down the combinations your family enjoys the most. You’ll want to make it again!

Sandwiches, cold milk and fruit may not be the gourmet meal you see in magazines, but it works for families who want to spend more time together. The key is *make it quickly, but eat it slowly.*

#### ***Choose a made-ahead meal***

A **slow cooker** is a family mealtime friend when life is busy. It smells great when you walk in and sets the mood for a comfort food meal. In the morning, sprinkle a beef or pork roast with lots of steak seasoning and put it over a bed of vegetables (potatoes, carrots and celery, for instance). By evening, the meal is ready! Serve with a green salad, and plan the next slow cooker combination with the family.

**“Cook once, eat twice” meals** have become a staple of some busy families. Some cooks double every recipe that is freezable. Families enjoy lasagna or homemade soup one day, and the other half is wrapped, marked and dated for the freezer in individual or family size packages. On a particularly busy day, the family cook can defrost one or more of the meals, and reheat in the microwave.

#### ***Choose a meal that’s tasty for everyone***

To add variety to family meals and to give every family member some individual choices, try a **potato bar**. Even small children like “building” a meal. For a potato bar, start with baked potato halves. Provide topping options like broccoli, shredded cheese, heated chili (even a can of chili works!), chopped green pepper, and light sour cream. Possibilities for toppings and sauces are endless. The more veggies offered, the better.

Try a **burrito buffet** or **pita party** as another way for each family member to build a meal to individual taste with fillings, stuffings and fun. Recipes aren’t necessary, but imagination is!

## Summary

Family mealtime is important to the nutritional health of your family and it can help family members feel closer. When family members' schedules don't coincide, finding time to eat together as a family can be challenging. Remember, family meals do not have to happen daily. Even a meal together once a week can provide benefits for your family. Be realistic. Note the barriers and plan around them.

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