

Sharing meals with family

Indicator overview

VicHealth Indicators Survey

VicHealth Indicators are used to measure community wellbeing with a focus on social determinants of health.

Survey topic areas include: wellbeing, healthy eating and sedentary behaviour, use of green space and safety, smoking policy, alcohol, using of social networking, participation in arts activities and the community, social attitudes, and work, life and time.

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Introduction

The family plays an important role in shaping children's eating and physical activity patterns. Sharing family meals has been associated with having a healthy body weight and the consumption of healthy foods (Videon and Manning 2003). Shared meal times also provide opportunities to teach children about manners, nutrition and healthy eating, and should be seen as a special time for families to connect and share the day's or week's events (Fiese and Schwartz 2008).

Habits developed during childhood are maintained throughout life (Mikkilä et al. 2004). As a result it is important for children to develop good food habits in their formative years. Studies have found that family members tend to share eating habits, exercise routines, food preferences, and physical activity levels (Gruber and Haldeman 2009, Hammons and Fiese 2011, Lee et al. 2009). The benefits of shared meals are not isolated to evening meals, but can include family breakfasts and weekend lunches (Larson et al. 2007).

Health benefits

When families eat meals together, the evidence suggests that they consume more nutritious food than when each family member eats alone. Family meals tend to include more fruit and vegetables, less fried food and sugar-sweetened beverages, less saturated and trans fats, and more fibre, vitamins and minerals (Rockett 2007, Story and Neumark-Sztainer 2005). Planned family meals also promote regular meal times and routines that encourage less snacking between meals (Fruh et al. 2011).

Shared family meals may act as a protective factor for many nutrition-related health problems during childhood and adolescence. Children and adolescents in families who share meals three or more times per week are more likely to be in a normal weight range and have healthier eating patterns than those who share family meals less frequently (Hammons and Fiese 2011). Further, evidence suggests that the health benefits for families that share a meal at least five times each week include less tobacco and alcohol use, and fewer depressive symptoms (Story and Neumark-Sztainer 2005).

Barriers to meal sharing

Many families find it difficult to plan and find the time for sharing family meals because of conflicting schedules (Fulkerson et al. 2008). When there are no ingredients in the house or little time to prepare the family meal, eating together is less likely to happen (Devine et al. 2006). Without adequate planning, there may be a temptation to purchase convenience foods and fast foods (that are often high in salt, fat and sugar) thus reducing some of the benefits of the shared meal (Fulkerson et al. 2008).

Find out more

Family meals, Kidshealth.

http://kidshealth.org/parent/nutrition_center/healthy_eating/family_meals.html

The importance of family meals, Belinda Mooney.

<http://suite101.com/article/the-importance-of-family-meals-a25269>

Family meals: more than just eating at home, Meals matter.

www.mealsmatter.org/Articles-And-Resources/Healthy-Living-Articles/Family-Meals.aspx

What is a family meal? Ideas and tips for eating together, Nutrition Australia.

www.nutritionaustralia.org/sites/www.nutritionaustralia.org/files/national/Fact%20Sheet%202011c.pdf

Why family meals are important, Raising children network.

http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/eating_with_toddlers.html

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