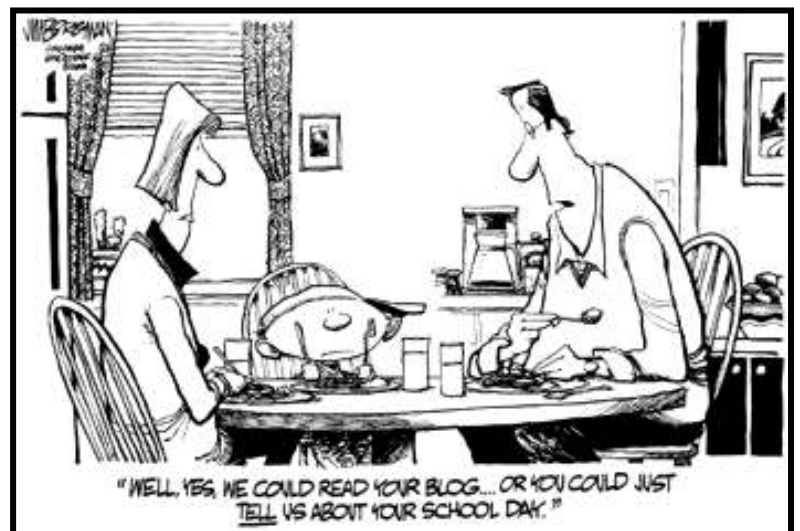


## The Importance of Family Meals

Family meals are a time-honored ritual and an important part of American culture. The sharing of food at meals is a symbol of family unity, love, connections, and communication. Yet recently, families have undergone profound social changes in family structure and some worry that the family meal ritual is disappearing.

- ❖ Surveys indicate that more than 80% of parents view family dinners as important. Adolescents also value family meals. A national survey found that 79% of teens cited eating dinner at home as one of their top-rated family activities.
- ❖ While sharing family meals together may be valued among parents and youth, studies show that only about 1/3 of adolescents eat dinner with their family every day. About 60% of teens have dinner with their family five times a week. About 22-32% of teens report eating dinner with their family rarely or a few days each week. (A recent survey conducted by the Community of Concern, revealed that 53% of Canton's high school students eat one meal or more a day with their families.)

- ❖ Family meals decline throughout adolescence. Students in middle school and junior high school eat more family meals together than students in high school.
- ❖ The major reasons cited by adolescents for not having family meals included: parent and teen schedules, desire for autonomy, poor family relations, and food dislikes. Busy or conflicting schedules of parents and adolescents were the most frequently mentioned reason. Work schedules, extracurricular school activities, or socializing with friends are commonly mentioned. The majority of adolescents said they would eat healthier foods if they ate more often with their parents.



- ❖ Recent studies have found a positive association between frequency of family dinners and dietary quality in adolescents. Frequency of family meals is linked to greater intakes of fruits and vegetables, milk, and higher nutrient intakes including calcium, iron, vitamins, fiber, and with less fried food, fast food, and soft drinks.
- ❖ Studies have also shown a correlation between frequent family dinners and a reduced risk that a teen will smoke, drink, or use illegal drugs. For example, teens who have dinner with their families two nights a week or less are at twice the risk of substance abuse as teens who have frequent family dinners. (The Community of Concern survey also showed a strong correlation between time spent at home with families and reduced use of substances, although the *degree* of impact could not be precisely confirmed.)
- ❖ A recent study proved eating together as a family during adolescence had lasting positive effects on dietary quality in young adulthood. Adolescents who ate with their families grow up to be healthier adults who eat more fruit, dark-green, and orange vegetables and key nutrients and consume fewer soft drinks. Frequency of family meals also predicts girls would eat breakfast as adults. Among boys, family meals predict higher intakes of calcium, magnesium, potassium and fiber as adults.

In summary, the frequency of family meals is associated with more positive dietary intakes and healthy behaviors among adolescents. Family meals can also facilitate family interaction, communication and a sense of unity. Because of the multiple benefits of eating meals together as a family, health professionals working with youth and families should promote the importance of family meals. Increasing the frequency of family meals potentially could be a promising intervention for improving adolescent nutrition and health outcomes.