

The family that eats together stays healthy together

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In this fast-paced world, it can be a challenge for families to find time to share a meal. But a nutritionist in Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences says sitting down to eat as a family is worth juggling your schedule.

"Research tells us that taking time for family meals has many rewards," said Mandel Smith, Penn State Cooperative Extension nutrition educator. "Nutrition and family-life professionals agree that families that eat together four or more times a week tend to eat healthier, more nutritious foods."

Developing family traditions and rituals is an important part of building a healthy family, and many families use mealtimes as a way to develop these traditions, according to Smith. "Family traditions do not have to involve a major holiday," she said. "Your family can develop traditions around everyday activities. Pizza or some other family favorite on the same day of the week can be a tradition.

"Giving thanks for the meal in your family's own special way can become a ritual," Smith said. "Remember, traditions and rituals can be simple and still have strong meaning to family members, while reminding them that they belong to a special, caring group."

Smith points out that family meal time also provides an opportunity for parents to model good habits. "Family mealtime can be an opportunity for parents to model appropriate table manners, healthy food choices and

good communication and listening skills," she said. "Children get the opportunity to practice these skills, which will be important throughout their lives."

Making time for shared family meals can take a great deal of effort, Smith said. In addition to arranging a time and place when everyone can gather at the table, each family member must be dedicated to making the most of mealtime. She suggests families turn off the radio, television, phone and other distractions.

It may be too much of a challenge to try to eat every meal together at the beginning, so Smith recommends that families start slow and learn from the first meals together. "Begin with one daily meal together for a few weeks," she said. "Once you find a time that works, go from there. Share positive things that have happened during the day.

"Families that eat together experience better communication, develop stronger family traditions and have an opportunity to improve table manners and social skills," Smith said. "If you think your family is too busy to eat together, think again. There are too many benefits not to."

Source: Penn State

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