

# One more reason to promote the family dinner

January 28 2010, By Geoff McMaster

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Health experts have long held that children shouldn't watch more than one to two hours a day of television. Too much screen time encourages sedentary behaviour and contributes to rising levels of obesity.

If that time in front of the T.V. is spent eating dinner, however, children face double trouble. According to evidence collected by U of A public health scientist Paul Veugelers, the T.V. dinner and poor nutrition go hand in hand.

"In terms of nutrition, the worst thing you can do is eat in front of the television," says Veugelers. "It seems to be worse than the number of hours you actually watch television."

Veugelers research, presented Tuesday at a public-health seminar on campus, shows that Alberta children consume bigger portions, more fat, more [snack foods](#) and more sugar-especially soft drinks-in front of the television, while consuming fewer fruits and [vegetables](#).

Body weight rises significantly with the number of times per week children eat in front of the T.V., he says. In Alberta, 26.6 per cent of children who do it once per week or less are overweight or obese. That figure rises to 37.6 per cent for those who indulge in T.V. evening meals five times a week or more. At least 10 per cent of children meet or exceed the latter frequency.

The main culprit in this unhealthy equation is what Veugelers calls [mindless eating](#), when one is barely conscious of what, and how much, is being consumed.

"I'm from Europe, so I'm a big soccer fan. If I watch an exciting soccer game, and there is a tray of cookies next to me, I will cheer and watch the game, and at a certain point I'll look over and say, 'Hey, where did those cookies go?' I ate them all, but was I aware of it? No. It was subconscious.

"That's why we're trying to sell the point now that eating in front of the television is doubly bad," he says. "On the one hand, it's a sedentary activity, and that's widely acknowledged, which is why the Canadian and American pediatric societies recommend children not watch more than two hours a day.

"What is not acknowledged is the [poor nutrition](#) that goes together with watching television, particularly eating supper." He adds that his results don't account for breakfast or lunch, which can further compound the problem: "I hear some schools turn the [television](#) on during the lunch hour, and this can all add up."

In light of his findings, which apply to [children](#) between the ages of two and 17, Veugelers recommends that the American and Canadian pediatric societies put more emphasis on the promotion of family meals.

Provided by University of Alberta

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