

Study: Low-income families' diets often fall short in nutrition

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(Medical Xpress) -- More than seven in 10 low-income families in a new University of Nebraska-Lincoln study struggled to reach adequate levels of nutrition in their diet, researchers said.

When asked to recall [food choices](#) from the previous day, only 28 percent of participating parents and [caregivers](#) reported meals with adequate amounts of [nutrients](#) like vitamins A and C, [protein](#), [calcium](#) and iron, according to the study.

The work, which appears in the current edition of Family & Consumer Sciences Research Journal, measured more than 100 low-income families' eating patterns, and also examined their meals' nutritional value to determine how certain meal patterns could lead to more nutritious diets.

The results showed that many nutritional issues could be tackled if the whole family ate together more often -- especially at breakfast time, said Wanda Koszewski, UNL extension associate professor of nutrition and health sciences and the study's lead author.

While a majority of families in the study said they usually gathered for dinner at least five times a week, that number dropped to four or fewer times a week for breakfast and lunch. About 43 percent of study participants said their families ate breakfast together two or fewer times a week; the same percentage held true for lunch.

Researchers said increasing the frequency of family breakfasts would have big effects on important parts of the diet -- the more often families ate breakfast together, the better their intake would be with foods from the milk group, fruits and fruit juices, in particular.

"Nutrients we get from these food groups such as calcium, folate, potassium, [Vitamin C](#) and Vitamin A are critical in the diets of young children and are often lacking in the diet of limited-income children," Koszewski said. "Due to the fast-paced lifestyle of many families, not having breakfast together makes it difficult to meet these nutrients later in the day."

The study adds new evidence to research on the relationship between regular family mealtimes and healthy lifestyles. Research has shown that in addition to contributing to more nutritious diets, having the family gather frequently for meals can help prevent any number of high-risk behaviors.

"Food and nutrition professionals need to look at not only foods being consumed in the household but to also examine who is eating together and how often," she said. "They can work with families in problem-solving how to improve the family mealtime and frequency to help their children meet their nutritional needs."

The participants in the new UNL study were recent enrollees to the Nebraska Nutrition Education Program, which helps families on limited budgets improve the quality of their [diet](#). Participants filled out surveys and questionnaires during in-person nutrition classes.

Provided by University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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