

# Family meals remain important through teen years, expert says

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As children become teenagers, it may be more challenging to regularly include them in family meals, but doing so is key to heading off such problems as eating disorders, obesity, and inadequate nutrition in adolescence, said Barbara Fiese, a University of Illinois professor of human development and family studies and director of the U of I's Family Resiliency Center.

"The common belief is that teens don't want to be around their parents very much, and that teens are just too busy for regular meals with the family," she said. "Parents may not be able to get their families together around the table seven days a week, but if they can schedule three [family meals](#) a week, they will safeguard their teens' health in significant ways."

She advises family members to pull out their schedules and find out which nights they can commit to, then follow through and make family meals on those nights a priority.

In the June issue of [Pediatrics](#), Fiese and postdoctoral research associate Amber Hammons reviewed 17 recent studies on eating patterns and nutrition involving more than 182,000 children and [adolescents](#).

The results showed that teens who eat at least five meals a week with their families are 35 percent less likely to engage in [disordered eating](#) than teens who don't. The researchers defined disordered eating as bingeing and purging, taking [diet pills](#), self-induced vomiting, using [laxatives](#) or diuretics, fasting, eating very little, skipping meals, and/or

[smoking cigarettes](#) to lose weight.

"For children and adolescents with disordered eating, mealtime provides a setting in which parents can recognize early signs and take steps to prevent detrimental patterns from turning into full-blown [eating disorders](#)," she said.

Children who ate at least three family meals a week were also 12 percent less likely to be overweight than those who ate with their families less often. And they were 24 percent more likely to eat healthy foods and have [healthy eating habits](#) than those who didn't share three meals with their families.

The researcher said that families who share meals together are likely to be more connected, which may encourage teens to talk within their families about unhealthy behaviors they've slipped into and other problems they're experiencing.

"If you look at national surveys, the frequency of shared mealtimes does begin to drop off in the teen years, but a lot of that is due to competing demands on teenagers' time due to after-school activities, jobs, and social life, and not for lack of interest," she said.

The study showed that teens are interested in participating in family mealtimes and believe that they eat healthier when they share meals with their families, she said.

According to the expert, research on adolescent development indicates that teens want to stay connected with their parents. "Family meals give them a place where they can go regularly to check in with their parents and express themselves freely," she said.

"If family meals are not a forced activity, if parents don't totally control

the conversation, and if teens can contribute to family interaction and feel like they're benefiting from it, older kids are likely to welcome participating," she added.

If you've gotten out of the family meal habit and don't relish the prospect of receiving one-word answers from your teenagers (Q: What happened at school today? A: nothing), Fiese and her colleagues have compiled some conversation starters for both English- and Spanish-speaking families.

Here's one: If you won a million dollars, what would you do with it and why?

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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