

Regular family meals together boost kids' fruit and vegetable intake

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Regular family meals round a table boosts kids' fruit and vegetable intake, and make it easier for them to reach the recommended five portions a day, indicates research published online in the *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*.

The [World Health Organization](#) recommends a daily intake of five 80g portions of fruit and vegetables to promote good health and stave off serious disease and obesity in later life.

And the Department of Health in England has spent around £80 million on campaigns attempting to boost the nation's fruit and [vegetable intake](#) and improve dietary habits.

But consumption still falls below recommended levels—and not just in the UK—but also in much of Europe, the US and Australia, say the authors.

The [home environment](#) is likely to be a key factor, because this is where dietary habits are developed and cues taken from parents who exert the most influence on the quality of a child's diet, they add.

They therefore looked at the diets of more than 2000 primary school children, attending 52 different schools across London. English was a second language for almost half (46%) the kids, whose average age was eight.

[Dietary intake](#) at home was assessed using a validated Child and Diet Evaluation Tool (CADET) questionnaire, filled in by parents. CADET uses age and gender specific food portion sizes to calculate nutritional intake and lists 115 separate types of food and drink, divided into 15 categories.

Parents were also asked to complete a home food diary, detailing how often they ate meals together as a family and their own levels of fruit and [vegetable consumption](#).

The CADET analysis showed that, on average, the children ate 293g a day of fruit and vegetables, equivalent to 3.7 portions a day. But those who ate family meals together consumed the most.

Among the 1516 children whose parents completed the home [food diaries](#), those who sometimes ate family meals together ate 95g more fruit and vegetables every day than those who never ate together.

But children who always ate family meals together ate an average of 125g more every day.

Other factors also helped. Children whose parents ate fruit and vegetables every day also ate 88g more, on average, than those whose parents rarely or never did so.

Children whose parents always cut up their fruit and vegetables ate around 44g more than those whose parents did not. And intake increased by 5g for every additional type of produce available in the house.

But in the final analysis, those children who always ate [family meals](#) together had higher nutrient intake than those whose families sometimes ate together (4.6 portions) and those whose families never did so (3.3 portions).

And these children reached their recommended five a day quota.

"The results from this study illustrate a positive health message for parents, which could improve their own [dietary habits](#) and their children's," write the authors. "The key message..is for families to eat fruit and vegetables together at a mealtime."

More information: Family meals can help children reach their 5 A Day: a cross-sectional survey of children's dietary intake from London primary schools Online First, [doi 10.1136/jech-2012-201604](https://doi.org/10.1136/jech-2012-201604)

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