

Even without kids, couples eat frequent family meals

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Couples and other adult family members living without minors in the house are just as likely as adults living with young children or adolescents to eat family meals at home on most days of the week, new research suggests.

The study is the first large-scale look at family-meal eating patterns in American [adults](#). While a substantial amount of research has focused on health benefits for children who regularly eat [family meals](#), such eating patterns have not been widely studied in adult-only households.

Researchers analyzed data on more than 14,000 Ohio adults, comparing family-meal patterns among adults who lived with minor children to households with at least two adult family members and no children under age 19 living with them. In both types of households, about half of the families ate meals together six or seven days per week.

Because most Ohio demographics are comparable to the entire United States, the researchers say they would expect to find similar patterns in national data.

The finding is a first step toward exploring whether adults who eat frequent family meals also experience [health benefits](#). Previous research has suggested that children and adolescents who eat frequent family meals have healthier diets and are less likely to report eating disorders, substance use and depressive symptoms.

"There are a lot of families that don't have children. And we've forgotten about them in this context of thinking about sharing food and time together and what that means," said Rachel Tumin, a doctoral student in epidemiology at The Ohio State University and lead author of the study.

"If all adults eat frequent family meals, then it's worth thinking of them as a holistic group versus maintaining a more narrow focus on just those adults who have minor children living with them," Tumin said. "If the answer had been that adults with no kids at home never eat family meals, then there would be no point in subsequent research to find out if it's good for them. But with these data, we can bring this whole other group along with us in our thinking as we shift to exploring in what ways family meals are beneficial to overall [public health](#)."

Tumin conducted the research with senior author Sarah Anderson, associate professor of epidemiology at Ohio State. The study is published in the journal *Public Health Nutrition*.

The researchers used data from the 2012 Ohio Medicaid Assessment Survey, which collects information on health behaviors, health status and demographic characteristics from a random sample of the state's adults. Of the 22,929 respondents surveyed, data on 14,057 adults who lived with at least one family member – 5,766 who lived with minor children and 8,291 adults not living alone or with minor children – were used for this new analysis.

In all households studied, family members living together were related by birth, marriage, adoption or legal guardianship. Of the individuals from the original survey not included in the Ohio State study, 7,788 did not live with any family members and the rest were ineligible because their data were incomplete.

The dataset did not provide information to more specifically characterize

all the different types of families covered by the survey, but many of the adults not living with minor children are likely to be married couples who do not have children or whose children are grown. Data from the 2010 U.S. Census indicated that more than half of the husband-wife family households in the United States did not include children.

Family meal frequency was assessed based on responses to this survey question: "During the past week, on how many days did you and your family eat at least one meal together at your home or residence?"

The results for both groups were startlingly similar, with the distribution of family meal frequency for adults not living with children closely mirroring that of adults who were living with minor children. Roughly half of all Ohio adults ate a meal together with their family at home six or seven days per week, and few in either group reported zero family meals (5 to 7 percent).

"Most people value family meals and engage in this behavior. The prevalence of never eating family meals or eating together only once a week is low," Anderson said. "We thought the distribution would be different, and we hypothesized that adults with children would be much more likely to eat together as a family. The data showed otherwise. If further research finds associations between higher frequency of family meals and improved health outcomes for adults, that will have implications for public health messages."

In almost all cases, the similarities between groups held even when demographic factors influenced the frequency of family meals. African-American families, adults who were not married and those who were employed ate family meals less frequently than white and Hispanic families, married people and the unemployed. That pattern was true for adult-only families and families with minor children.

"Whatever underlying factors are associated with marital status, race and ethnicity, and employment seem to have the same effect on eating family meals regardless of whether or not you have kids in the household," Tumin said.

However, age did affect the family-meal pattern. Among adults who did not live with minor children, the adults who were older ate more family meals than those who were younger. Almost half of families with children in the home ate family meals most days of the week regardless of the adults' age.

This analysis does not reveal any information about the quality of the meals that families are sharing, so Tumin plans to move in that direction with research on family meal preparation and any distractions in the dining environment.

Despite the extensive previous research on family meals for children and adolescents, key questions remain: What exactly constitutes a family meal? And is there a dose effect, meaning that more family meals per week can translate into a specifically defined health benefit?

"It's challenging to tease apart and understand what it means to have a family meal and why it's beneficial and how it plays into all other family activities," Tumin said. "Claiming that [family](#) meals are the be-all and end-all and that everyone should eat them all the time may be too simplistic a message. We don't have enough information yet to tailor that message with data that back it up."

Provided by The Ohio State University

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