

Teens who dine with their families may be slimmer adults

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Study found eating meals together once or twice a week was tied to lower risk of becoming overweight.

(HealthDay)—For those teens who try to avoid spending time with their parents and siblings, new research suggests that sitting down for family meals might help them stay slim as adults.

Despite everyone's busy schedules, researchers found that just one or two gatherings around the kitchen table each week were well worth the effort.

"There are numerous distractions that could keep families from having family meals. However, this study shows that even trying to have a few family meals a week could be beneficial for guarding against overweight and obesity in adulthood," noted study author Jerica Berge, an assistant professor in the department of family and community medicine at the University of Minnesota Medical School, in Minneapolis.

Using data from a 10-year study involving more than 2,000 teenagers, the researchers examined variables that could affect young people's weight, such as diet and physical activity. The [teens](#) were asked how often they sat down for family meals. The researchers also recorded each teen's body mass index—a measurement that determines whether a person is a healthy weight for their height.

After a decade, 51 percent of the teens involved in the study were overweight and 22 percent were obese overall, the study published recently in the *Journal of Pediatrics* found.

The researchers noted that when the study began, 15 percent of the teens said they never ate family meals. Of those teens, 60 percent were overweight at the 10-year follow up and 29 percent were obese.

Meanwhile, among the teens that reported eating between one and five family meals per week, only 47 percent to 51 percent were overweight a decade later, and 19 percent to 22 percent were obese.

So, how do family meals help prevent weight gain? The protective effect is likely due to a combination of factors, according to Berge. "Although we don't know exactly why having family meals is protective, family meals may provide a combination of activities such as opportunities for healthful eating, connection among [family members](#), creating a supportive environment for emotion regulation and a sense of security that give children the ability to regulate their own eating behaviors in their day-to-day lives," she explained.

Research has shown that American children and teens sit down for an average of about two to four family meals per week, according to Berge. She noted this includes breakfast and lunch, as well as dinner.

Another study Berge conducted, which was published earlier this week

in the journal *Pediatrics*, found that calm, positive family meals might help a child avoid becoming overweight or obese.

One expert noted that her clients are really trying to carve out time for family meals.

"The '50s were the epitome of the family meal," explained Kristi King, a clinical dietitian at Texas Children's Hospital in Houston. "As society became more fast-paced, we found ourselves drifting away from the family [meal time](#). Now, in practice, I see families very much wanting to try and slow down and reinstitute the family meal on a regular basis."

For busy families, having just one family meal is a great place to start, Berge pointed out. "It may not matter which day of the week it occurs or that it is the dinner meal. The important thing is to start making [family meals](#) a regular occurrence," she said.

Limiting distractions can also help, advised King.

"Just one meal can give families the opportunity to 'check-in,' but that is assuming technology takes a backseat during meal time," she said. "Kids learn by watching their parents. So parents should set the example they wish their children to follow. Try having the whole family disconnect for 30 minutes during meal time and actually having a conversation."

King also pointed out that meals at home are typically lower in calories and contain more fruits and vegetables.

While the study found an association between [family](#) meals and a lowered risk of obesity in adulthood, it did not prove a cause-and-effect relationship.

More information: The U.S. National Heart, Lung, and Blood

Institute provides more information on how to [prevent obesity](#).

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