

Dinner at home is a main ingredient for healthy eating

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Credit: Wikipedia.

People who eschew takeout for home cooking eat healthier foods, whether they aim to or not, according to new research from the Johns Hopkins University.

"When people cook most of their meals at home, they consume fewer carbohydrates, less sugar and less fat than those who cook less or not at all - even if they are not trying to lose weight," said Julia A. Wolfson, the lead author of the study and a fellow at the Center for a Livable Future at Hopkins' Bloomberg School of Public Health.

The findings may be obvious to some, or at least reassuring to others, but they could have implications for the obesity epidemic facing adults and children in the United States if enough people are persuaded to cook

their own meals.

Wolfson, a trained chef, said some people don't think they know how to cook or don't think they have the time. Others may not have ready access to healthy ingredients, such as fresh produce. Many people are just out of the habit.

She said cooking at home doesn't have to be fancy or expensive, and most people just need a kick-start, like a cooking class, menu advice or tips to navigate grocery aisles.

For the study, published in the journal *Public Health Nutrition*, Wolfson and others analyzed data from a national survey of 9,000 adults about what they ate.

The 8 percent who cooked only once a week or less consumed an average of 2,301 calories, 84 grams of fat and 135 grams of sugar a day. The 48 percent who cooked dinner six or seven nights a week consumed 2,164 calories, 81 grams of fat and 119 grams of sugar a day.

Those who cooked at home tended to rely less on frozen food and were less likely to eat fast food when they dined out. People in African-American households cooked less often than those in white households, and people who worked full time away from home cooked less often.

These results were no surprise to Susanna DeRocco, who helps individuals, families, schools and others get on track in the kitchen with advice and recipes through workshops and her website, HealthyBodiesHappyMinds.org. She said meals can be made even healthier with some thought.

Most people just don't know where to start and feel overwhelmed by the idea of cooking, she said. The certified health coach, nutritional

counselor and Towson mother advises people to start small and simple.

Pick a day, like Sunday, find one or two easy recipes online, and go to the store. After getting comfortable making a few meals, consider making a double batch and freezing half, or at least figuring out a second use for the leftovers.

Maybe rice was part of a stir fry one night and covered in beans the next, she said. Or the pasta gets customized with slightly different toppings to please different tastes in the house.

And, DeRocco said, do some [food preparation](#) in advance of the workweek, like chopping vegetables, so everything is ready to go - this may even be a money saver as people use the produce they buy rather than throwing it away.

"Most people I know struggle in the planning," she said. "They're coming home at 6 and opening the fridge or pantry and saying, 'What am I going to do?' That's what you want to avoid. And you can, with a little planning."

Cooking at home is mostly about developing a habit, DeRocco said, and "not letting Pinterest or Martha Stewart intimidate you."

Lisa Manuel, a mother of 7-year-old Chloe and 9-year-old Burke, sought help from DeRocco about two years ago to develop that kind of routine, though she, her children and her husband all eat at different times and don't all like the same things.

"It felt like a 24-hour buffet," she said.

She was heartened to hear that just eating at home meant they were likely eating healthier than families that don't, but she wanted to do

better.

Manuel now tries to feed the family some of the same things, or variations of them. She plans, shops and preps ingredients on the weekends and stows batches of food in the freezer. She acknowledges doing better for her kids than for herself.

"I'm not as disciplined as I should be," she said. "I need to sit down and eat a meal and not snack in between everyone else's meals. ... When I stick to it, I feel a lot better. When I'm off track, I can definitely tell."

To help meet its goal of reducing heart disease by 20 percent by 2020, the American Heart Association offers basic cooking classes with chef Tia Berry.

Berry said the organization wanted to help people not only cook at home but make healthier choices about ingredients.

Obesity has drastically increased across the nation over the past two decades, with more than a third of adults and 17 percent of children now in that category, according to U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data. That has contributed to an increase in rates of heart disease, stroke, diabetes and some types of cancer, and \$147 billion in additional annual health spending.

Berry said if people are trying to make lifestyle changes and cook at home, it would be easy to improve the nutritional value of the food. For example, make potato or other salads with a vinaigrette rather than a mayonnaise base, and don't deep-fry anything.

"We offer recipes that are easy and familiar, like fajitas, chili and salad, that are heart-healthy and not anything too complicated," said Berry about the 10 Simple Cooking with Heart Kitchen classes the association

offered in Baltimore. There are also recipes and tutorials on the organization's website.

"It's not five-star restaurant food," she said, "but it is things that people are comfortable with and are not as intimidated by."

She said most people eat the same things over and over, so it's a matter of choosing a few healthy recipes and practicing.

Cooking dinner at [home](#) regularly requires a lifestyle change, but, Berry added, "it doesn't have to be complicated. You just need to pay attention to what you're eating."

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