

Distracted dining? Steer clear of it!

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A new University of Illinois study reveals that distracted dining may be as dangerous to your health as distracted driving is to your safety on the highway.

"Being distracted during meals puts kids at added risk for obesity and increased consumption of [unhealthy foods](#). In this study, we found that noisy and distracting environments affected parents' actions, and we know that parents set the tone for the quality of [family mealtimes](#)," said Barbara H. Fiese, director of the U of I's Family Resiliency Center (FRC).

How pervasive are the effects of a disturbance when a family is actively trying to eat a meal together?

To test the effects of mealtime distraction, U of I researchers videotaped 60 families during mealtime in the FRC's family research home. Half the families were subjected to the sounds of a loud vacuum cleaner in an adjacent room for 15 minutes while they were eating (participants were told on arrival that a popcorn spill had happened at an earlier event and janitors were late in arriving). The other half experienced no distraction.

In other measures, participants' BMI was measured, and food consumption, action, behavior, mealtime communication, and critical communication were observed and recorded during the meal.

The effects of the distraction were more marked for parents than for children. Parents ate more cookies and chose more diet beverages over

sugary drinks than the quiet group, but they also ate more carrots. Parents and children ate the expected amount of pizza, Fiese said.

"The noise did have a big effect on communication. Adults got up and down from the table a lot more and made fewer positive comments. They paid less attention to their children's concerns in conversation, and we know that kind of conversation is associated with a healthier weight in children," Fiese noted.

Why is this important? When [parents](#) are distracted, they're probably not monitoring what their kids are eating and they're probably not demonstrating positive interest in the children, she said.

"If you're getting up and down because you're distracted during a meal, you're probably not able to pay attention to the kids' emotions or to model good responses to your hunger cues—noticing when you're full and not continuing to eat," the researcher said.

Fiese noted that [mindless eating](#) is a frequent topic in other research about adults' dietary habits, but the topic hasn't been looked at from a whole-family perspective before.

"We haven't really thought about what it means if adults—who are supposed to be regulating what's happening—are distracted during family mealtimes. It doesn't portend well for the family's eating habits as a whole," she said.

According to Fiese, the beneficial effects of regular family mealtimes are many and well known. Teens are less vulnerable to substance abuse and eating disorders; younger children do better in school and have fewer behavior problems, she said.

"This study shows that it's not enough to encourage families to eat

together regularly without identifying other factors that promote health. Distractions and disruptions may be part of a family environment that is habitually chaotic and unstructured. We know that [children](#) raised in chaotic family environments are at increased risk for becoming overweight or obese," she said.

More information: Barbara H. Fiese et al. Family mealtime dynamics and food consumption: An experimental approach to understanding distractions., *Couple and Family Psychology: Research and Practice* (2015). [DOI: 10.1037/cfp0000047](https://doi.org/10.1037/cfp0000047)

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