

Cooking family meals, skipping TV during those meals linked to lower odds of obesity

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Credit: The Ohio State University

Adults who don't flip on the TV during dinner and those who eat home-cooked meals are less likely to be obese, a new study has found.

But the frequency of [family meals](#) doesn't appear to make much of a

difference, according to research from The Ohio State University.

The study found that adults who reported never watching TV or videos during [family meals](#) had significantly lower odds of obesity compared with peers who always watched something during mealtimes. Those whose family meals were all home-cooked also had lower odds of obesity than other adults who ate some or no home-cooked meals. The study appeared in the *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*.

"How often you are eating family meals may not be the most important thing. It could be that what you are doing during these meals matters more," said lead author Rachel Tumin, survey and population health analyst manager at the Ohio Colleges of Medicine Government Resource Center.

"This highlights the importance of thinking critically about what is going on during those meals, and whether there might be opportunities to turn the TV off or do more of your own food preparation," said Tumin, who conducted the study as part of her PhD dissertation with senior author Sarah Anderson, associate professor of epidemiology in Ohio State's College of Public Health.

The new study suggests that the structure of family meals may be as or more important than their frequency, Anderson said.

"Obesity was as common in adults who ate family meals one or two days a week as it was in those who ate family meals every day. Regardless of family meal frequency, obesity was less common when meals were eaten with the television off and when meals were cooked at home," she said.

Tumin and Anderson's analysis found the lowest odds of obesity for those adults who engaged in both healthy practices - eating home-cooked food and doing it without a TV or video on - every time they ate a family

meal.

But that doesn't mean it's an all-or-nothing proposition, Tumin said.

"Families have a lot of demands and they can feel pressured to do things 'right' all the time. This study showed potential benefits regardless of how often you eat a family meal at home," she said.

Though family-meal frequency did not emerge as a possible contributor to [obesity](#), that doesn't mean it doesn't carry other perks for families, including social and emotional health, Tumin said.

Research in children and adolescents has found frequent family meals lead to better dietary outcomes and lower chances the children will become overweight or obese. And other studies have shown that adolescents who watch TV during family meals consume less-healthy meals.

Prior to this, though, few studies had examined possible connections between mealtime practices or family meal frequency and health outcomes in a large, population-based group of adults.

The data come from the 2012 Ohio Medicaid Assessment Survey, a telephone survey of Ohioans. Included in the study were 12,842 survey participants who said that they ate at least one family meal in the week prior to their interview. Obesity was defined as a body mass index at or above 30, calculated from self-reported height and weight measures collected in the survey.

More than half of participants reported eating family meals on most days, 35 percent on some days and 13 percent on few days per week. One third of the study participants were obese. About a third watched TV or videos most of the time during family meals and 36 percent said

they never did.

The results held up after the researchers took into account other differences in the study population, including employment status, whether they were married, race, education and age. Because it was based on a survey of current behavior and weight, the study does not offer evidence of a cause-and-effect relationship between meal habits and weight.

More information: Rachel Tumin et al. Television, Home-Cooked Meals, and Family Meal Frequency: Associations with Adult Obesity, *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics* (2017). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jand.2017.01.009](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jand.2017.01.009)

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