

Family dinners improve teens' eating habits no matter how well family functions, study finds

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Kathryn Walton. Credit: University of Guelph

A new University of Guelph study has revealed teenagers and young adults who sit down for family dinners—regardless of how well the family unit manages daily routines, communicates and connects

emotionally—are more likely to have healthier eating habits than if they graze or fend for themselves at suppertime.

"Gathering around the [dinner table](#) is sort of a magical thing," said lead researcher Kathryn Walton, dietitian and U of G Ph.D. student who worked on the study with [family](#) relations and applied nutrition professor Jess Haines.

"It's a time when families can slow down from their busy days to talk, spend time together and problem-solve. It's also a time that parents can model healthful eating behaviours."

The [researchers](#) found that when families sit down together, adolescents and [young adults](#) eat more fruits and veggies and consume fewer fast-food and takeout items.

The study to be published Nov. 21 in *JAMA Network Open* looked at more than 2,700 participants 14 to 24 years of age who were living with their parents in 2011. They were asked how often they sat down for dinner with their families, how well their family functions, and about their consumption of fruit and vegetables, sugar-sweetened beverages, fast food and takeout food.

The study found that [family dinners](#) are associated with better [dietary intake](#) for adolescents from both high and low functioning families.

"To reap the many benefits of family dinners, the meal doesn't have to be a big drawn-out affair," said Haines. "Even if it's something you pull out of the freezer, add a bagged salad on the side and you'll have a decent nutritional meal."

Walton said many teens and young adults living at home are busy with evening [extracurricular activities](#) or part-time jobs, making it hard to

find time for [dinner](#) with family members. But finding that time once a day—even if it's breakfast together—can be just as effective.

She also said when family members participate in helping to prepare food, they are more likely to eat it. Getting the whole family involved helps cut down on prep-time and teaches adolescents important food skills. Every meal together counts, start with one and sit down together more frequently as the family schedule allows.

Walton, who is currently working as a post-doctoral researcher at Sick Kids Hospital in Toronto, said she hopes to study ways to make it easier for busy families to have meals together. She said prepping weekly meals on the weekend can help families avoid heading for the drive-through window when bellies start to grumble.

"Our research found that family dinners are a great way to improve the dietary intake of the whole family, regardless of how well the family functions together," said Walton. "Preparing and enjoying a meal together can also help families bond. It's a win-win."

More information: *JAMA Network Open* (2018). [DOI: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2018.5217](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2018.5217)

Provided by University of Guelph

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