

How beneficial is a family meal?

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Georgia Middleton: "Trying to chase the ideal of the family meal might be introducing yet more pressures to family life."

The family meal has long been associated with numerous health and wellbeing benefits for both adults and children, but researchers from Flinders University's Caring Futures Institute are questioning where the hard evidence is to support this emotive belief.

With changing pressures influencing a [modern family](#)'s time commitments, lead researcher Georgia Middleton is examining whether the longstanding ideal of the [family](#) meal is still a viable option for many time-poor families, and whether trying to pursue the traditional model of the family meal ideal is introducing unnecessary increased pressures to families.

She found a lack of conclusive evidence about the benefits family meals have on [health](#), through examining existing family meal research, but has identified a need to shape a clearer model of ideal family eating habits through further research.

The resulting study—"What can families gain from the family meal? A mixed-papers systematic review", by Georgia Middleton, Rebecca Golley, Karen Patterson, Fairley Le Moa and John Coveney—has been published by *Appetite*.

"Our aim is to find what is the most beneficial meal model, in ways that maximise nutrition and health, enjoyment and engagement, adaptability and efficiency," says Ms Middleton, a Ph.D. candidate at Flinders University's College of Nursing and Health Sciences. "At the moment, there are many people trying to chase the ideal of the family meal model that might be introducing yet more pressures to [family life](#)."

As a consequence of identifying gaps in assessment of family meal benefits, Ms Middleton is now calling for participants in new research that will provide detailed snapshots of how families eat in diverse Adelaide suburbs—initially targeting the areas surrounding Ferryden Park in the west, and Burnside in the east.

Participants in the new study will be reimbursed for their time with an \$80 gift voucher and the chance to win one of six Sprout Cooking School 'Quick. Easy. Healthy' cookbooks. Details can be found on the

study website: <https://www.facebook.com/thefamilymealstudy>

"We are currently looking for families, with at least one child aged 12 years or under living at home, to participate in a virtual interview to discuss their current experiences with the family meal, and the work involved in bringing the family together for the family meal today," explains Ms Middleton.

While their systematic review found a lack of causal evidence that family meals are beneficial to health, this does not mean family meals are not beneficial for health, or that families should stop engaging in them.

"More work is needed in this area to better understand the relationship between family members and meals, especially if we are to continue promoting the family meal as a health and wellbeing strategy for families," she says.

Looking at research conducted in the past 10 years, Ms Middleton found that existing studies into family meals do not clearly determine whether changes in health outcomes are due to changes in the family meal, or changes to other behaviours.

"We need to develop more nuanced and specific measurements of the family meal, so we can ensure effectiveness and impact of the family meal on health and wellbeing is being adequately captured and assessed," says Ms Middleton. "The new research will help develop strategies that are achievable and sustainable for families."

More information: Georgia Middleton et al. What can families gain from the family meal? A mixed-papers systematic review, *Appetite* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.appet.2020.104725](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2020.104725)

Provided by Flinders University

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