

A family meal a day may keep obesity away

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This is an image of a weight scale. Credit: CDC/Debra Cartagena

Increasing rates of adolescent obesity and the likelihood that obesity will carry forward into adulthood, have led to various preventive initiatives. It has been suggested that family meals, which tend to include fruits, vegetables, calcium, and whole grains, could be protective against obesity. In a new study scheduled for publication in the *Journal of Pediatrics*, researchers studied whether frequent family meals during adolescence were protective for overweight and obesity in adulthood.

Jerica M. Berge, PhD, MPH, LMFT, CFLE, and colleagues from the University of Minnesota and Columbia University used data from a 10-year longitudinal study (2,287 subjects), Project EAT (Eating and Activity among Teens), to examine weight-related variables (e.g., [dietary intake](#), physical activity, weight control behaviors) among adolescents. Questions were asked to assess family meal frequency and [body mass index](#). According to Dr. Berge, "It is important to identify modifiable factors in the home environment, such as family meals, that can protect against overweight/obesity through the transition to adulthood."

Fifty-one percent of the subjects were overweight and 22% were obese. Among adolescents who reported that they never ate family meals together, 60% were overweight and 29% were obese at the 10-year follow-up. Overall, all levels of baseline family meal frequency, even having as few as 1-2 family meals a week during adolescence, were significantly associated with reduced odds of overweight or obesity at the 10-year follow-up compared with those reporting never having had family meals during adolescence. Results also showed a stronger protective effect of family meal frequency on obesity among black young adults compared with white young adults. However, the limited significant interactions overall by race/ethnicity suggest that the protective influence of family meals for adolescents spans all races/ethnicities.

Family meals may be protective against obesity or overweight because coming together for meals may provide opportunities for emotional connections among family members, the food is more likely to be healthful, and adolescents may be exposed to parental modeling of healthful eating behaviors. As noted by Dr. Berge, "Informing parents that even having 1 or 2 [family meals](#) per week may protect their child from overweight or obesity in young [adulthood](#) would be important." Using this information, public health and health care professionals who work with adolescents can give parents another tool in the fight against [obesity](#).

More information: "The Protective Role of Family Meals for Youth Obesity: 10-year Longitudinal Associations," by Jerica M. Berge, PhD, MPH, LMFT, CFLE, Melanie Wall, PhD, Tsun-Fang Hsueh, MS, Jayne A. Fulkerson, PhD, Nicole Larson, PhD, MPH, RD, and Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, PhD, RD, MPH, appears in *The Journal of Pediatrics*, DOI: [10.1016/j.jpeds.2014.08.030](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpeds.2014.08.030)

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