

# Family Dinners Are Important

10 reasons why, and 10 shortcuts to help get the family to the table.

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After-school activities, late workdays, long commutes -- it's no wonder few families eat dinner together. Yet studies show that the family dinner hour is an important part of healthy living.

When families dine together, they tend to eat more vegetables and fruits -- and fewer fried foods, soda, and foods with [trans fats](#), research shows. When younger kids frequently eat dinner with their families, they are less likely to be [overweight](#) than other children. That tends to change in the teenage years, when they're less likely to eat at home.

It's a serious concern, since statistics show that nearly one in five children aged 6-19 in the U.S. are overweight. That puts them at higher risk for many health problems later in life, including [heart disease](#), high blood pressure, and diabetes -- as well as emotional problems.

"One of the simplest and most effective ways for parents to be engaged in their teens' lives is by having frequent family dinners," says Joseph Califano Jr., chairman and president of The National Center on Addiction and [Substance Abuse](#) at Columbia University (CASA).

CASA recently reported on a national phone survey of 1,000 teens and 829 parents of teens. Eating dinner as a family helped kids in many ways. It helped them get better grades, and kept them away from cigarettes, alcohol, and [marijuana](#), and more.

## 10 Benefits of Family Dinners

Toting up all the benefits of frequent family dinners:

- Everyone eats healthier meals.
- Kids are less likely to become overweight or obese.
- Kids more likely to stay away from cigarettes.
- They're less likely to drink alcohol.
- They won't likely try marijuana.
- They're less likely to use illicit drugs.
- Friends won't likely abuse prescription drugs.
- School grades will be better.
- You and your kids will talk more.
- You'll be more likely to hear about a serious problem.
- Kids will feel like you're proud of them.
- There will be less stress and tension at home.



## 10 Tips for Organizing Family Dinners

Don't let this mission feel daunting! Even the simplest meals -- like order-in pizza -- qualify as family dinners. The goal is to get everyone to the dinner table and to spend quality time together - not to force Mom into June Cleaver or Carol Brady mode. Here are tips on pulling it off:

- Set a goal. Twice a week, perhaps? Build from there.
- Keep it simple. Family meals don't have to be elaborate. Work salads and vegetables into meals. Focus on familiar favorites, like chili or frittatas.
- Be prepared. Keep ingredients for healthful meals on hand, including plenty of fruits and vegetables.
- Keep healthy 'appetizers' on hand. Stock the kitchen with fresh fruits, nuts, and low-fat cheese -- stuff the kids can snack on after school, instead of chips.
- Get the family involved. Let kids help prepare meals and set the table.
- Use the crock pot. Put everything together before leaving for work in the morning. You'll come home to the delicious smell of a cooked meal.
- Pick up take-out, order pizza, or eat out. It still counts as quality time spent together.
- Avoid portion distortion. Keep serving sizes under control, whether you're at home or eating out.
- Make it enjoyable. Leave the serious discussions for another time. Family meals are for nourishment, comfort, and support.
- Set the mood. Play soothing music. Put flowers on the table. Light a candle. Create a relaxing environment.

Here's another hint -- no TV allowed, no phones answered! This is time for listening to each other, sharing the day's stories, and nurturing the family connection.

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