

Family Meals

I often sound like a broken record. Are you eating together as a family? How often? Many of you are, and I applaud you. Many of you desperately want to sit down for meals as a family, but can't seem to fit it in amidst the varied schedules of all your family members. Then there are some of you that dread sitting down together without the T.V. on as the kids will bicker among each other or complain they don't like what is being served.

All of you are determined to get healthier, and this week I'd like to emphasize that getting healthier is a lot more than about what we are eating or not eating. Being healthy is also about emotional health and positive family relationships. The structure of family meals gives us a framework on which to hang the foods and connections that you and your family need. Meals provide us with a reliable access to food, and they provide our children with reliable access to their parents and to caring. Without meals, a home is just a place to stay. Grazing won't give you the connections your family needs. Grabbing food on the run won't either. Our bodies physically need food, but our entire beings need attention and connection from the people who know us and love us. Meals are as essential for nurturing as they are for nutrition.

If family meals are so important, then why are they fading in our current society? One of the huge barriers to family meals is time. How to get everyone home from work and school in time to prepare and sit down to a meal together is the big question? When to shop? What to prepare (that everyone will eat)??? Many of us have fallen out of habit (or never even gotten into the habit) of preparing and serving meals at home. Take out or eating out, or just grabbing whatever is often what's for dinner. It takes some work. It takes some commitment, but the bottom line is families are not going to get healthy by trying to monitor what and how much they eat. It will help, but it is not enough. Families are going to get healthy by being together, enjoying their food, and paying attention to each other.

So, where to start? Think slow but steady. Think of the foods you like that are practical, convenient, and if possible, somewhat healthy and nutritious. Meet as a family and discuss making a new commitment to sitting down for family dinners. Try it three times the first week. Find the days that work best for all of you realizing that there may need to be some compromising of schedules if family dinner is going to be a priority. Insist that everyone be at dinner. No excuses, even for the Dad or Mom who usually doesn't get home from work until 7p.m. If something is really important to us, we find a way. Then brainstorm with your family favorite meals that usually are acceptable to most family members so you'll have a standard list of meals as ideas you can work from. Enlist each family member to help with preparation. Someone to set the table, someone to make a salad, someone to be a parent helper in preparing the meal, someone to clear the table while someone else does the dishes and cleans up the kitchen. Commit to serving everyone exactly the same thing whether you think they will

like it or not. People eat when they are hungry, and if you have met as a family beforehand to decide on some standard meals there are no surprises.

Habits are hard to start, but can become routine. Preparing, serving, and eating dinner as a family are habits to be developed and nurtured. I guarantee you will bring a lifetime of health and happiness to your family that will be passed down for generations if it is your priority.