

Background

Eating Together: The Family Meal

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What is a family meal? This question is asked differently in various studies; however, most studies ask some variation of "how often do you eat together with your family". The Add Health Study specifically asks about the presence of a parent and asks if the parent is present, not whether the parent is actually eating in addition to the child (1). Most studies focus on the dinner meal, however some studies specifically ask about breakfast, and other studies do not specify the meal.

Prevalence of family meals in general

It is challenging to compare the prevalence of eating together in the various studies, as the definition of eating together varies. Nevertheless, there seem to be parallels, as noted below:

National Eating Trends, a market research survey of 1,300 households representing adults in Canada (2005) showed (2):

- 50% of adults with children say they eat all seven evening meals together
- 14% say they eat six out of seven meals together.

Veugeliers (3) reports that among grade five students in Nova Scotia:

- 59% eat supper together at home five or more times/week.
- 27% eat supper together at home two or fewer times/week.
- 12% eat supper together at home less than once a week.

Dianne Neumark-Sztainer and her colleagues (4) report that among adolescents in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area:

- One-third eat with their families only two or less/week.
- 14% never eat a meal with their family.

In a follow-up study with the above participants, Larson and colleagues (5) note that when these adolescents had reached young adulthood (five years later) 35% of males and 42% of females reported they lacked time for social eating (i.e. eating either with family or friends).

A UNICEF report examined the percentage of 15-year-old students who said that in general, they eat the main meal of the day around a table with their parents "several times a week" (6). The results are reported for the 25 countries that make up the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development). The mean for all countries was 79.4% of 15-year-olds reporting that they eat together several times per week (standard deviation 9.8). Canada was ranked 18th out of 25 countries, with 71.8% of 15-year-olds saying they eat together with their parents several times a week. The top three ranking countries were Italy (93.8%), Iceland (90.8%) and France (90.4%). The U.S. ranked 23rd out of 25 countries, with 65.7% of 15-year-olds reporting eating together with their parents several times per week. It is worth noting how the U.S. ranks in comparison to Canada, as currently much of the available data on family meals is from the U.S.

Several researchers have noted that eating meals together as a family declines as children get older. For example, in Quebec, the *Enquête sociale et de santé auprès des enfants et des adolescents québécois 1999* (7) showed that:

- 70% of children aged nine ate six to seven meals together with family
- 67% of children aged thirteen ate six to seven meals together with family
- 51% of children aged sixteen ate six to seven meals together with family.

Frequency of eating meals together as a family varies by ethnicity. Neumark-Sztainer, et al. found that Asian-American adolescents reported a greater frequency of eating meals as a family than did Caucasians, African American, Hispanic, Native American or those adolescents selecting "mixed/other" as their race or ethnicity (4). Marie Marquis and Bryna

Shatenstein also found variation by ethnicity among Haitian, Portuguese and Vietnamese immigrants to Quebec with regard to family meals (8). In particular, researchers found that health motives predicted eating together as a family among Haitian and Portuguese mothers while both health and familiarity were the predictors of family meals among the Vietnamese mothers.

How eating together as a family is valued

Eating meals together as a family is consistently highly valued. Seventy-four per cent of adolescents reported enjoying eating with their families, and 62.9% said they valued family meals (9). Additionally, almost all parents (97.7%) of the adolescents surveyed in reported valuing family meals.

According to Turcotte, Canadians say mealtime is the favourite time of day for family members to interact and talk about their day (10). Nevertheless, this same report shows that 18% of the decline in time spent with family between 1986 and 2005 can be attributed to the fact that workers are increasingly eating alone.

Larson's work (5) adds dimension to our understanding of the value of eating together by extending the definition to include friends as well as family. In her cross-sectional analysis of young adults who had previously participated in ProjectEAT (Eating Among Teens) over three quarters of young adults (76.2% of males and 82.2% of females) agreed that it is important to sit down and eat at least one meal a day with family or friends. They also overwhelmingly agree (88.8% of males and 93.1% of females) that they enjoy social eating.

Role modelling

Family meals provide the ideal opportunity for parents to role model eating behaviour. Fisher, et al. demonstrated that mothers who drink milk have daughters who drink more milk and less soft drinks (11). Subsequently, this research group also demonstrated that parents who eat more vegetables and fruit have daughters who eat more vegetables and fruit (12). Although the studies did not look at when consumption happened, the authors of the study suggest that the reason mothers' or parents' intakes predict daughters' intakes may be related to what they make available to their daughters and that daughters may imitate what they see their parents consuming.

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