

Family Eating Time

By Bill Bradley, Registered Dietitian and Cookbook Author

My wife and I share most of our meals at home together. This is sacred time, usually without cell phones or other distractions, when we can catch up on the day's events and connect. We are usually eating home cooked food that is Mediterranean in nature (lots of olive oil, vegetables and beans with small amounts of grains and meats). We were both raised on family breakfasts and dinners. Part of what has attracted me to the Mediterranean diet is its emphasis on community and family gatherings.

People of the Mediterranean take family dinners to a whole new level with some meals lasting so long that it is time for the next meal by the time they are done with the first one!

The research on eating as a family is very conclusive. Eating together, at home, will decrease risk of depression, stress, and addiction. A study done by Columbia University's Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse showed that teenagers who ate infrequent family dinners (fewer than 3 times per week) were "twice as likely to have used tobacco, almost twice as likely to have used alcohol and one and a half times more likely to have used marijuana" than teens who ate frequently with their family (5 to 7 times per week).

Eating together, as a family, has also been shown to increase communication skills and self-confidence. And what about nutrition? Does eating together as a family make a difference? Yes! Teenagers that ate meals with their families were more likely to eat fruits and vegetables and much less likely to drink soda or eat fried foods.

What about as you get older? Does eating together make a difference? Yes again. Older adults (over 50) who are living with someone ate 2.3 more vegetables per day than those who lived alone. Eating alone has also been shown to be a risk for increased depression in older women and an increased risk of men being underweight. If connection to others is missing, we tend to lose our way. And eating is something that we need to do every day.

Some people say they don't have time to sit down for a formal meal. I think eating together as a family or with friends is important enough to make time for. If you don't have a lot of time to cook, use a crockpot or a Dutch oven. Both these tools make prepping and cooking quick and easy. If your family seems to always be on a different schedule, then maybe it's time to plan and schedule to eat at least a few meals together throughout the week. Do you live alone? Invite some friends over or start a weekly dinner club (meals shared at different homes). Volunteer to help serve meals at homeless shelter or food bank.

Be creative! Eating meals together is not only good for your health, it is also fun and hopefully the meals will be delicious! Your body, heart and soul will thank you! Bon Appetit!

