

Your Health

Matters

WHAT'S FOR DINNER?

Can you remember the last time your family enjoyed a meal together?

I think the most important thing you can do with your kids is eat dinner with them.

I know life is crazy. In many homes, both parents work full-time, and evenings seem to be a hectic race to get kids to sports practice, dance class, music lessons, or other activities. Delicious food is hot and ready at restaurants and fast food drive-thrus are all over town. It seems impossible to find the time to fix a home cooked meal and sit down for a family dinner each night.

The USDA reports that one in three meals is purchased and/or eaten away from home, accounting for nearly half of American's food spending. Other studies report that more than half (63%) of children under the age of 12 eat out at a restaurant 1 – 3 times each week.

It can be very challenging to make the time to plan, cook, and enjoy a family meal, but experts say eating a family meal at home together has multiple benefits.

Home cooked meals are likely to be more nutritious. Rather than eating a greasy hamburger and french fries, you can prepare foods high in nutritional value. Serve fresh fruits and vegetables, lean meats like chicken and fish, whole-grain breads, and low-fat dairy products. You can also select an appropriate portion size for each family member, depending on their age, gender and caloric needs.

Regular family meals reduce unhealthy snacking. Research shows that children who eat regular meals with their family eat more fruits and vegetables and less fried foods and sugary drinks. They also snack less on unhealthy foods.

Family meals allow for strengthened relationships. Sitting around the table together having pleasant conversation gives families an opportunity to connect. Studies show teens that regularly eat meals with their family are less likely to use drugs, drink alcohol or smoke, and are more likely to have healthier diets as adults. Surveys show that one of the strongest tools parents have to raising healthy, drug-free children is engaging them around the family dinner table.

To succeed at holding family mealtime, skip the drive-thru and follow these simple steps:

- Plan ahead. Anticipate the roadblocks and decide ahead of time how you will handle them.
- Involve family members. Toddlers can set the table. School-aged children can wash fruit and vegetables. Teens can assist with meal preparation, or even be the chef.
- Relax together at the table. Turn off the TV and engage in positive conversation.

Having regular family meals together helps families grow closer. It develops healthy eating behaviors and makes a big difference in your child's life.

To learn more, visit www.montgomerycountyhealth.org, Facebook or Twitter, or call 573-564-2495. The Montgomery County Health Department loves taking care of your family, and works every day to protect, promote and improve health in our community. ■

