



## Fun (and Nutritious) Family Meals: Preparing and Consuming Meals as a Family is *Healthy* and *Fun*!

Did you know that preparing and/or consuming meals together as a family\* results in real, scientifically proven benefits for everyone at the table? Over the last 20 years, studies have shown that eating meals together as a family results in better physical health, emotional/mental health and academic achievement of children. For example, adapted from [thefamilydinnerproject.org/resources/faq](https://thefamilydinnerproject.org/resources/faq); [fconline.org/the-importance-of-family-mealtime](https://fconline.org/the-importance-of-family-mealtime):

- Recent studies link regular family dinners with healthier, safer behaviors of children, such as: lower rates of substance abuse, lower rates of depression, as well as higher grade-point averages and self-esteem.
- Studies also indicate that for young children, dinner conversation is a more potent vocabulary booster than reading (of course reading every day is important too). Conversation and stories told around the kitchen table also help children build resilience and learn gratitude.
- Regular family meals lower the rates of obesity and eating disorders in children and adolescents, most likely because family meals are typically more nutritious than meals eaten alone or outside the home. A Harvard study found that families who eat together are twice as likely to eat five servings of fruits and vegetables as families who do not eat together.



*A family prepares a meal together around a kitchen counter. Photo by August de Richelieu via Pexels*

The act of preparing meals as a family also has many proven benefits, such as these adapted from [tunedinparents.com/2015/11/17/7-benefits-of-cooking-together-as-a-family](https://tunedinparents.com/2015/11/17/7-benefits-of-cooking-together-as-a-family):

- Helping build willingness to try new foods — children are more likely to eat what they make!
- Instilling family unity — instead of everyone doing things on their own, they spend time together on a joint project: the family meal.
- Teaching gratitude — appreciating that one has food available, as well as the effort it takes to make meals, is learned by cooking together.
- Aiding in childhood development – sorting and measuring ingredients, reading instructions and learning colors, smells and tastes are all things that a child can learn while cooking with their family.
- Teaching cooking skills, and the passing down of favorite family recipes — children will remember these moments cooking with their families.

If you are thinking, “wow, we don’t have time to do this,” don’t worry. These benefits can be realized even if you prepare foods/ consume meals as a family as little as one to two times a week. But we hope you’ll be able to find more opportunities to have fun with your family while preparing and consuming meals together. Remember, preparing foods and eating together doesn’t have to be just at supper time, it can be during breakfast, lunch or snack-time too. Check out the suggestions later in this document for making family-centered meal preparation and consumption as easy as possible.

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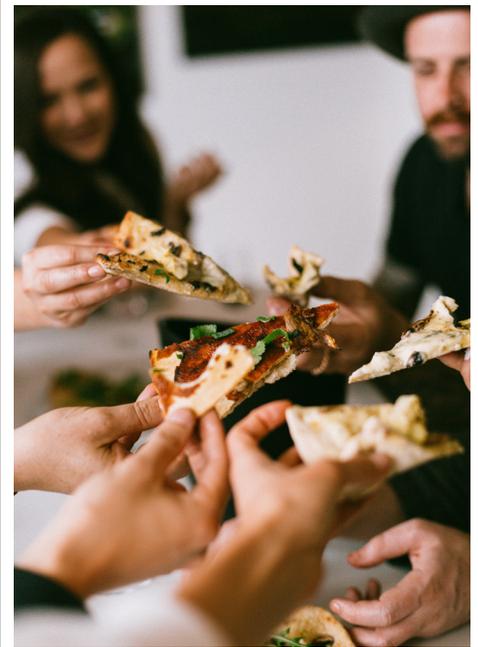
\*Two or more family members preparing and/or consuming meals is considered a “family” activity — so one parent and a child; an uncle or aunt and a child; a grandparent and a child — there are many combinations of family members that are considered a “family meal.”



## Fun Family Food-prep and Family Suppers = Togetherness

Preparing and consuming meals as a family is such great fun — full of laughs, new tasting adventures and sometimes messes! Consider these bits of helpful advice when preparing food as a family and when gathering together at the table:

- Create a set time each week for the family to plan the menu for the meal to be prepared together (or for a whole week of family cooking, if possible). Consider everyone's tastes, try new cuisines and make sure you keep a focus on planning to fill 50 percent of the plates with fruits and vegetables, 25 percent with lean baked or grilled (unbreaded) meats or plant-based proteins (like tofu or dried beans) and the last 25 percent with whole grains. Aim to keep added sugar (sugar, honey, maple syrup, corn syrup, etc.) to a minimum. Check out the two recipes included later in this document to kick off family meal preparation activities!
- Go shopping as a family for the ingredients you need for your meals — this is a great time for conversation while shopping for nutritious foods.
- Find a way to display the family-selected recipe(s) and the preparation schedule so everyone knows the steps for preparing your yummy meal! Tape the recipe(s) and schedule of food preparation activities to a cabinet, prop open the recipe book or make your phone screen of the recipe(s) available to all, etc.
- Make sure everyone washes their hands using soap for a minimum of 20 seconds (not under the stream of water), by singing *Happy Birthday to You* while scrubbing!
- Children may need a stool or chair to stand on to reach the countertop when helping chop or mix ingredients. Grandparents may need a chair as well since they may not be able to stand for long periods of time, and we sure don't want them to be left out of the food-prep fun!
- Safe knife and kitchen tool handling is important. When teaching children how to use tools, adult family members need to pay close attention at all times. Child safety knives can be purchased to help children safely learn to chop food in the kitchen.
- Get everyone involved in cleaning up, including during meal preparation, which will keep your kitchen tidy. When children participate in cleaning up the kitchen, it teaches them important skills they will use forever.
- On the weekends, get everyone together to prep ingredients for an easy leave-it-to-cook-and-enjoy-it-later crockpot meal to be enjoyed together later that evening. Check out some of these websites for ideas for healthy slow cooker meals: for general recipes try searching the internet for "healthy slow cooker recipes." This link has a bunch of good recipes: [bit.ly/C2Hhealthycrockpot](https://bit.ly/C2Hhealthycrockpot). For "clean" eating (gluten free, dairy free, grain free), check out the "clean eating couple" crockpot recipes at [bit.ly/C2Hcleaneatingcrockpot](https://bit.ly/C2Hcleaneatingcrockpot).
- Think about preparing a week of meals on one day to save time. Get the whole family together to help chop and prep! For example, check out: "How to Meal-Prep a Week of Healthy Family Dinners on Sunday" ([bit.ly/weekprep](https://bit.ly/weekprep)). If you have a big freezer, get your family together to prep ingredients for a week of meals to freeze and then use later in a crockpot. Check out this site for ideas: [bit.ly/frozencrockpot](https://bit.ly/frozencrockpot).



*A group shares a pizza. Photo by Daria Shevtsova via Pexels*

## Strategies for Bringing Home Healthy Meals for a Family Supper

On those days when all of you are being pulled in different directions, you may find the only option is to buy food outside the home, rather than prepare a home-cooked meal. As we all know, most times, a take-out dinner is not as nutritious as what we prepare at home. But if you have to do take-out, try to buy foods that will support the health and wellness of your family. Most fast food restaurants offer salads these days, and many have meatless options to try. Think about some of these suggestions for take-out:

- Load up on salads with colorful vegetables, fruits and nuts; possibly with grilled (not breaded) chicken or salmon. Choose a vinaigrette dressing with little added sugar — and remember that often times,



- Think about having family supper theme nights that celebrate other cultures, like Tuesday taco night, Wednesday Italian night, Friday homemade whole wheat veggie pizza night, and so forth. Have everyone look for recipes for the main dish, as well as side dishes and salads, to create the festive event! Consider spending time learning about the culture you're celebrating and share what you learned as a family discussion.
- Get everyone involved in the serving and cleaning-up of your family meal — younger children can set the table, toss the salad, bring small items to the family table and help clear the table when supper is over. Older children can pour water or unsweetened ice tea into glasses and carry them to the table, carry hot pots/ bowls to the table for a family style serving, cut the whole wheat bread loaf into slices, help serve the plates and clear away large pots and pans after supper. If you are interested in learning about the order for setting cutlery, check out: [bit.ly/C2Hsettable](http://bit.ly/C2Hsettable).



*A diagram of a table setting. Image via Real Sample*

- Try to keep the TV off and ask everyone to put aside social media — this is family time! Consider some of the “conversation starters” found later in this toolkit, if you find you'd like some prompts for family conversations.
- If you have someone (possibly a teen) who is not interested in eating meals as a family, think of creative ways to include them. For example, ask them to choose the music to play softly in the background, or ask them about something they are studying in school, and make a meal related to the topic (if they are learning Spanish history, perhaps make a Spanish meal).
- If you have family members who can't seem to stay at the table long enough for the family conversation, consider serving the meal in courses.

reduced fat dressings have more sugar than regular, so read the “added sugar” line on the labels.

- Choose stir-fry meals that are loaded with colorful vegetables, and if necessary, grilled (not breaded) meat proteins — or even better, choose tofu for some plant-based protein instead of animal protein.
- If you buy pizza, choose those with thin, whole wheat crusts and lots of veggies. Consider requesting that the pizza have half the amount of cheese (which is full of lots of saturated fat) — or even better, try a pizza without the cheese sometime!
- Get a side salad instead of fries, onion rings or other fried and high calorie sides.
- Steer away from all soda, sports drinks, most flavored waters (check the label for “added sugars”) and fruit juices (even 100 percent juice) — all of these are high in added sugars, and usually include food dyes. Also avoid diet sodas since they are loaded with artificial colors and ingredients, things that you don't want your family to put into their bodies. Avoid flavored milks as well, since these have lots of added sugars and food dye that your children's bodies don't need!



## Recipes to Try as a Family

### Zucchini Zoodles (or Spaghetti) with Homemade Red Sauce

- 2 tbsp olive oil
- 1 onion, thinly sliced
- 2 garlic cloves, minced (or 2 tsp pre-minced garlic)
- 1 28-oz can crushed tomatoes
- Approximately 3/4 cup water (1/2 of tomato can)
- 2-3 tsp seasonings (Italian seasoning, basil, and/or oregano)
- 1/2 tsp salt
- 1/2 tsp ground black pepper
- 3 medium zucchinis (or 8 ounces whole wheat spaghetti)
- Grated parmesan cheese or nutritional yeast (a vegan substitute)
- Tool: Spiralizer for making zucchini zoodles (see the image to the right)

1. Heat oil in large frying pan over medium-high heat till you see a ripple in the oil, then add the onion.
2. Sauté the onion for a couple of minutes until it softens.
3. Then add garlic and sauté for about a minute, until fragrant (don't let it burn).
4. Pour in crushed tomatoes, half a can of water (use the water to rinse out remaining tomato from the can), and stir to mix together.
5. Add seasonings, salt and pepper.
6. Bring to a strong simmer, then reduce to soft simmer and cook for 20 minutes, stirring often so the bottom doesn't burn. If the sauce gets too thick, add more water.
7. While the sauce is simmering, wash and peel zucchinis. Using a spiralizer, create zucchini zoodles. If using whole wheat spaghetti, boil spaghetti according to directions.
8. After the sauce is done, add zoodles to the pan, stir to mix completely and cook for two to three minutes until zoodles are warm and soften a bit. If using pasta, add it to the pan, mix and serve immediately. Sprinkle with parmesan cheese or nutritional yeast. Enjoy!

#### Children can:

- Help pour oil into the cool frying pan (before it heats up)
- Cut the onion (under adult supervision)
- Sauté the onion and garlic
- Measure and add seasonings to the sauce
- Stir the sauce while it simmers
- Spiralize the zucchini (under adult supervision)
- Add spaghetti to the pasta water (under adult supervision)



*Zucchini spirals. Photo by Tony Webster via Wikimedia Commons*



## Veggie Scrambled Eggs

- 2 tbsp olive oil
  - ¼ cup chopped onions
  - ½ cup chopped peppers (green, red, orange or yellow)
  - ½ cup fresh seasonal veggies (chopped tomatoes, zucchini, broccoli, mushrooms or other favorite)
  - ¼ cup chopped fresh basil, parsley or cilantro (optional)
  - 6-8 eggs
  - ½ tsp water
  - ½ tsp salt
  - ¼ tsp ground black pepper
1. Heat oil in large frying pan over medium-high heat until you see a ripple in the oil, then add all vegetables except the tomatoes.
  2. Sauté all the vegetables (except tomatoes if using) until the onions become transparent, and the other vegetables soften, stirring frequently.
  3. While the veggies are cooking, beat/whisk together the eggs, water, salt and ground black pepper (keep stirring the veggies!).
  4. Add the egg mixture to the vegetables, stir in the tomatoes and fresh herbs (if using).
  5. Stirring gently, cook until eggs are set.
  6. Serve immediately — Enjoy them with a piece of whole wheat toast topped with peanut butter (replacement for butter)!

### Children can:

- Help pour oil into the cool frying pan (before it heats up)
- Chop the vegetables (under adult supervision)
- Sauté the vegetables
- Measure and add water, salt and pepper
- Beat/whisk the egg mixture
- Pour the egg mixture into the frying pan (under adult supervision)
- Stir in tomatoes and fresh herbs, and cook eggs (under adult supervision)



*A person eating scrambled eggs off a plate.. Photo by Gian Cescon via Unsplash*



## Meal Conversation Cards for Family Mealtime

Sharing meals together is one of life's great pleasures! Use these Commit to Health Conversation Cards to start conversations during mealtimes. Find more fun nutrition activities at the Commit to Health website ([nrpa.org/CommitToHealth](http://nrpa.org/CommitToHealth)).

 <p>How does your body tell you it's hungry?</p>	 <p>How does your body tell you it's full?</p>	 <p>What is the best tasting food you've ever had? What is the best tasting healthy food you've ever had?</p>
 <p>After this meal, what type of fun physical activity can we do together?</p>	 <p>What new food would you like to try?</p>	 <p>What is something that happened in the news today?</p>
 <p>What did you do today at school? What was your favorite part of the day?</p>	 <p>What is your favorite fruit? How many different ways can you eat it?</p>	 <p>Do you know some of the jobs that your parents had when they were young? What would you like to do when you grow up?</p>
 <p>If you could be an animal, what would you want to be, and why?</p>	 <p>If you had your own garden, what would you like to grow?</p>	 <p>What is your favorite food to cook as a family?</p>
 <p>What is your favorite summer fruit? How do you eat it? How is it prepared, if not eaten raw?</p>	 <p>What is your favorite spring/summer/fall vegetable? How do you eat it? How is it prepared, if not eaten raw?</p>	 <p>What is your favorite sport to watch? What is your favorite sport to play?</p>
 <p>Have you ever had a plant-based food meal? (A meal that does not include any items from an animal)? If so, describe it. Do you think we could make one?</p>	 <p>What is your favorite vegetable? How many different ways can you eat it?</p>	 <p>Do you know what MyPlate is? If so, tell us about it.</p>
 <p>What is your favorite thing to cook?</p>	 <p>What is your favorite physical activity? When do you do it?</p>	 <p>What is your favorite home-cooked meal?</p>
 <p>Pick a food from our meal. How was it grown and how was it prepared?</p>	 <p>Write your own question here!</p>	 <p>Write your own question here!</p>