

Frequent family meals promote good nutritional health in children

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Breakfast at home: for the positive effects of family meals, it doesn't matter at what time of the day parents and children sit down together for a meal. Credit: fotolia / Lumina Images

Successful obesity prevention starts at home – at the family dinner table. The results of a meta-analysis conducted at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development and the University of Mannheim have been published in *Obesity Reviews*.

Eating habits are formed early in life. Family meals have huge potential as a [learning environment](#), where parents can demonstrate healthy eating habits and children can learn about nutrition and food preparation in general. The results of a meta-analysis conducted by researchers at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin and the University of Mannheim show that frequent family meals are associated with lower body mass index (BMI) and [healthy diet](#) in children. These relationships held irrespective of the country of the study and the children's age. It did not matter whether families ate breakfast, lunch, or dinner together, or whether meals were taken with just one parent or the whole family.

Parents as nutritional gatekeepers

"Childhood is a unique window of opportunity for countering detrimental eating and lifestyle habits. Parents act as 'nutritional gatekeepers' in that they have a substantial influence on when, what, and how much children eat. So family meals offer a rich learning environment for setting up [healthy eating habits](#) in children," says lead author Mattea Dallacker of the Max Planck Institute for Human Development. But family meals are not a silver bullet. The exact mechanisms underlying the relationship between frequent family meals and better eating habits remain unclear. "The current research indicates that it's not just the quality of food that's important, but that psychological and behavioral factors also play a role. For example, mealtime routines such as positive parental role modeling or a pleasant atmosphere could improve children's eating habits," says co-author Jutta Mata from the University of Mannheim.

Challenges for working mothers and fathers

In their meta-analysis, the researchers evaluated 57 studies with more than 200,000 participants worldwide. The analysis synthesized data from studies examining the relationship between family meals and children's nutritional health, measured in terms of [body mass index](#) (BMI), the number of portions of fruit and vegetables eaten per day (as an indicator of healthy diet), and consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages, fast food, and salty snacks (as indicators of an unhealthy diet). The influence of factors such as age, socio-economic status, type of family meal, and the number of [family](#) members eating together was also examined.

"Given the increasing trend for both parents to work, putting [regular family meals](#) on the table is a daily challenge for many families. In this context, it's important to note that initial findings indicate that other communal meals, such as school lunches,

can also have positive effects on children's [eating habits](#). For instance, one study showed that teachers can also serve as positive role models when eating together with their students," says Ralph Hertwig, Director at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development and co-author of the study.

More information: M. Dallacker et al. The frequency of family meals and nutritional health in children: a meta-analysis, *Obesity Reviews* (2018). [DOI: 10.1111/obr.12659](https://doi.org/10.1111/obr.12659)

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