

# Engaging in family meals starts with healthy family communication

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Engaging in family meals may be a matter of improving communication and support at home. A new study in the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, connects less family discouragement and better family

communication with a higher likelihood to eat evening family meals and family breakfasts together, and not in front of a television.

Researchers studied 259 parents who were also patients at either The Ohio State University or Wake Forest University accredited weight management and bariatric surgery facilities. They found parents who had better family communication and lower discouragement about trying to improve their eating habits were more likely to participate in [family meals](#).

"It's important to note all [family members](#) in the home have influence," lead study author Keeley J. Pratt, Ph.D., The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH, USA, said of the findings that any family member can influence the adoption and maintenance of healthy patterns and behaviors in the home. "Even if someone doesn't have the most power to influence the family (like [children](#)), they are all influencing each other."

Previous research has shown parental obesity is typically the strongest risk factor for children to have an obese weight status over time. The study's authors also found parents who perceived their child to be overweight or obese were more than four times as likely to talk to them about the child's weight, also called "weight talk."

While open communication with children about health is beneficial, "it's important to ensure communication directly about children's weight is not harmful in their development of a healthy body image and behaviors. That includes older children and adolescents who are at greater risk of developing eating disorders and disordered eating behaviors," Professor Pratt said.

There was no [significant difference](#) between male and female children in this study other than families with female children were more likely to eat dinner together without a television five to seven times a week.

Families with younger children, regardless of gender, were more likely to eat family dinners and breakfasts together, and parents of [older children](#) were more likely to talk about their own weight with the child.

This was the first study specifically looking at family meal practices among adult patients enrolled in [weight-management](#) or weight-loss surgery programs.

"Understanding these associations will provide essential evidence needed to design future family-based interventions for these patients to help in their behavior change and weight loss, prevent the onset of obesity in children, and enhance positive [family](#) meal practices and healthy communication about weight," Professor Pratt said.

**More information:** "Family Meal Practices and Weight Talk Between Adult Weight Management and Weight Loss Surgery Patients and Their Children," *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jneb.2020.04.001](#)

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