

BETter Living ...

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Family Meals Do More than Put Food on the Table

Make mealtime a family time. If you can get together for meals even a few times a week, family meals mean healthier eating – and more. For National Nutrition Month[®], the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics encourages all families to make a commitment to eating more meals together and "Enjoy the Taste of Eating Right."

"Research shows that family meals promote healthier eating – more fruits, vegetables and fiber; less fried food; and often fewer calories," says registered dietitian nutritionist and Academy spokesperson Angela Ginn. "This year's National Nutrition Month theme, 'Enjoy the Taste of Eating Right,' reminds families to return to the basics of healthful eating by returning to the family dining table."

"And family meals do much more than put healthy food on the table. Beyond preparing the meal itself, we sometimes forget that mealtimes offer time to talk, listen and build family relationships. And it's a chance for parents to be good role models for healthful eating," Ginn says.

Ginn offers ideas for adding more family meals to any family's routine:

- **Start slowly.** "However many meals you eat as a family now, add one more to your weekly schedule. If school nights are too hectic for a family dinner, make it a leisurely weekend breakfast or lunch. After a few weeks, add another family meal to your schedule," Ginn says.
- **Plan tasty menus together.** "Putting together a family meal does not have to be complicated or time-consuming. Let every member of the family choose a favorite item and build simple, delicious meals around them. Even small children can pick a main dish like tacos or pasta, a vegetable like a green salad or cooked carrots and sliced apples or fruit salad for dessert," Ginn says.
- **Set the right mood.** "Food is just one important part of mealtime. Your table setting can improve the mealtime mood with very little expense: a candle, colored napkins and wipe-clean plastic tablemats for children," Ginn says.
- **Talk!** "The conversations families have while eating together have a huge impact, as you share experiences and ideas, and pass along family values. Pick topics that are positive and allow everyone to talk. Even toddlers like to discuss topics like 'What is your favorite color?' or 'What made you laugh today?'" Ginn says.
- **Turn off the TV, phones and anything else that makes noise.** "They create distractions that can throw off any family's mealtime routine," Ginn says. "Declare mealtime a TV- and phone-free zone, except for emergencies, of course. Instead, put on some background music, played at low volume, to add a relaxing atmosphere."

No matter your children's ages, parents and caretakers can find countless resources and a wide range of information about eating right – all backed by the unequalled expertise of nutrition professionals like registered dietitian nutritionists – at Kids Eat Right (www.KidsEatRight.org), a

joint initiative of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics and the Academy's Foundation. "Kids Eat Right helps families shop smart, cook healthy and eat right," Ginn says.

For more information visit: www.eatright.org.