Family Dinner: It’s more than meat and potatoes

A typical family dinner takes about 25 minutes to prepare and lasts about 20 minutes. Family roles are changing. Often, the entire burden of food shopping, planning, and preparation does not fall to the wife alone. Family members, including husbands, are helping in the kitchen, too.

Eating family dinner improves nutrition, and there is a solid link between nutrition and improved health. Nutrition is not only related to health in the short term, such as improved immune functioning, but to long-term health as well, such as chronic disease prevention. Both adults and children benefit from improved diet quality. Research demonstrates that people who eat at home more frequently have better quality diets than people who eat out frequently. When meals are eaten at home, calcium, fruit, vegetable, whole grain, and milk intakes increase. Also, soda and high-fat food consumption decreases compared to when meals are eaten away from home.

In addition to the nutritional benefits of family dinner, there are social benefits as well. When asked, children and even teens say that they enjoy family dinner. Research associates higher levels of emotional well-being and fewer inappropriate weight-control behaviors with a greater frequency of family meals. Interestingly, the benefits associated with family meals are independent of socio-economic status.

A secret to minimizing stress when it comes to planning and preparing dinner is to keep a well-stocked pantry. A well-stocked pantry may contain foods such as: dried or liquid milk; frozen, canned, or dried vegetables and fruit; rice, pasta, cornmeal, crackers, bread, or tortillas; canned or dried beans; canned tuna fish, chicken, or salmon; soup; oatmeal and/or breakfast cereal; and peanut butter and jelly. Other staples to keep on hand may include: cooking oil, eggs, cheese, flour, sugar, herbs, and spices.

Successful family dinners need to be planned. Perhaps not all family members are available at the same time due to work schedules. Nonetheless, select which days of the week most members of the family can participate in the family dinner. Start slow, but strive for at least three family dinners a week. Many of the social and health benefits of eating family dinners can be seen when families have at least three family dinners a week.

When you plan your menus, keep things simple. It’s sharing the meal, not the complexity of the cooking that counts. Fancy tableware and linens are not necessary and may detract from the enjoyment of the meal.

The MyPlate approach to menu planning is easy. MyPlate contains five food groups: vegetables, fruits, grains, protein foods, and dairy. A food item from each of these five food groups should be represented at dinner. Even when eating a casserole or another mixed dish, a food item from each food group should be included in the meal.
When planning the meal, about half of the plate should be covered with vegetables and fruit. When it’s in season, fresh produce may be best. However, frozen, canned, and dried fruits and vegetables also have nutritional value and are easy to store and prepare. Try different vegetables instead of always having potatoes, peas, and corn. Green beans, spinach, or cauliflower might make for an interesting vegetable choice.

Grains include foods made of wheat, corn, rice, oats, and barley. It is best to choose whole grains for their added nutrition and fiber content. Grain foods include bread, pasta, tortillas, rice, corn muffins, and barley. A serving of these foods should fill about one-fourth of the plate.

The protein foods group includes meat, poultry, and fish as well as beans, nuts, and seeds. The serving of protein should not be larger than one-fourth the size of the plate. In other words, a piece of meat should not be larger than a deck of cards. Try chicken, fish, and beans, which are good protein sources.

Milk should be served with meals unless cheese or yogurt is already included. A fortified soy milk beverage can be substituted for milk.

Examples of easy family dinner menus might include:

- bean and vegetable soup, whole wheat bread, apple slices, and milk;
- a ground beef, lettuce, tomato and shredded cheese burrito served with papaya slices; or
- a pork chop with Swiss chard, cornbread, apple sauce, and milk.

When planning your family dinners, take advantage of familiar family recipes. If you want to try preparing something new, look for recipes that have a few ingredients, and read through the entire directions before deciding. Keep meals simple, and make only one item that takes extra or long preparation. You want to be able to enjoy your family dinner relaxed, not exhausted from cooking.

Remember, a main reason for having family dinners is to connect with and enjoy family. Minimize distractions by setting a few rules. Keep the television off, do not take phone calls, and leave all other electronic devices off the dinner table. Keep family dinner family time.

The Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service offers free and low-cost nutrition and health programs. Please contact your local county Extension agent for more information.

Sources:


MyPlate, [http://www.choosemyplate.gov/](http://www.choosemyplate.gov/)