

Taking the Stress Out of Family Meals

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Feeling the pressure of busy summer schedules yet? Give your mealtime motivation a boost by trying the following tips from the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics:



- Keep it simple. On extra busy nights, prioritize recipes with fewer ingredients. With input from your children, create a small collection of family favorites to help you get in and out of the kitchen in less than 30 minutes. Cycle through these recipes regularly, and pretty soon both grocery shopping and meal prep will be a snap.
- Choose ingredients that do double duty. Save shopping time by stocking up on ingredients you can use for more than one meal throughout the week. Cook two pounds of lean ground beef, instead of one. Use half for sloppy joes on whole grain buns one night, and reheat the other half to throw in a casserole the next night.
- Drive past the drive-thru. A trip to a favorite take-out place is lovely, on occasion. Depending on your menu choices, however, it could be taking away from your family's health in more ways than one. A semi-homemade meal that includes lean protein, whole grains and vegetables will provide great nutrition, and hopefully leftovers (Oh, hello savings!). Keep it semi-homemade by using canned or frozen vegetables and store-bought sauces or spice packets. The key is to read labels in order to choose the versions low in extra salt, added sugar, and saturated fat.
- Make family meals an expectation. Whenever your schedules do ease up, tell every family member to be home for dinner at a set time on days when it works. The hope is that everyone will start to look forward to this time together, making it easier to prioritize.
- Make it enjoyable. Add some excitement to family meals with theme dinners. Use a checkered tablecloth for an Italian-inspired meal, and bust out the chopsticks when serving an Asian-inspired dish. Dine al fresco (that's in the open air) on the back patio, and bring a cheat sheet of fun conversation starters to liven up your family discussions. You might learn something new about one another.
- Start small. You don't have to drive past the drive-thru every time to make family meal gains. Set a goal to limit take-out to a couple times a week. If you have a set schedule, designate your busiest couple days for these meals each week. Make a commitment to prepare a semi-homemade meal at home at least one night per week. Before you know it, you'll be enjoying a new tradition and setting new, bigger family meal goals.

Check out more Family Fun on the Run Newsletters: <http://go.unl.edu/familyfun>

Sources:

1. Family Meals Small Investment Big Payoff (2019), Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics
2. Strong 4-H Families Eat Together: Mealtime Family Conversation Starters. West Virginia University Extension Service.

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