

Eating Meals as a Family: Fun and Good For You!

Sitting down for family meals seems harder to do these days when everyone is running in different directions. But a recent study published in the *Journal of Pediatrics* found young adults who ate just one or two family meals a week as kids were 45 percent less likely to be overweight as compared to those who had never eaten with their families.

Some of the thinking behind this is that when we eat as a family we eat more slowly and intentionally. Parents may be more careful about the kinds of foods they serve. Portion sizes or how much we actually consume tends to be less.

But eating together can also promote connection and a sense of love and belonging which helps reduce the impact of stress on the body. We know that stress can stimulate the production of hormones that can affect our metabolism, or our ability to burn fat. Caring, supportive interaction with other people is one of the most powerful ways to help our bodies release stress.

Faith communities can be a vital resource for encouraging families to eat together. Set a day of the week when congregation members all commit to eating a family meal and offer a time during your religious services for members to report on how their meal went. Create a pack of cards with conversation topics to discuss over a meal. Encourage youth to cook at home one night a week as part of your youth program. Share recipes that are quick and healthy through your social media or on old-fashioned note cards that people can pick up after services or religious education programs.

Eating as a family is fun and doesn't take as much time as you might think. Give it a try!

Prayer: Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, king of the world, who brings forth bread from the earth. (Ancient Jewish blessing)

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Hidden ingredients to watch for in prepared foods

"Being able to grab and go with prepared meals, like frozen lunches and packaged snacks can be very easy," says Kayla Hansmann, dietitian at [Advocate Illinois Masonic Medical Center](#) in Chicago. "Convenience is great, but what's the long-term cost to your family's health? A few extra minutes spent preparing fresh foods now can be less costly than the risks to your family's future health."

Hansmann says it's especially easy to overlook possibly harmful ingredients in prepared foods, if you're not reading the nutrition labels fully. She says there are four hidden ingredients you should look out for:

1. **Partially hydrogenated oils**—These oils may also be labeled as trans fats on the nutrition label, but the amount listed may be tricky because any amount of trans fat less than 0.5 grams can be reported as 0, so you may end up getting trans fats even if it says it contains 0. Hansmann suggests looking at the ingredient list and avoiding any hidden trans fats listed as "partially hydrogenated oils."
2. **MSG and sodium**—Packaged foods often contain a great deal of sodium, as not only reported on the nutrition label, but in the ingredients list as MSG. Ethnic dishes can be particular sources of MSG, which is often used as a flavor enhancer. Other foods that may contain hidden sodium are lunch meats, cheeses, frozen pizzas and even fresh baked breads.
3. **Sodium nitrates/nitrites**—This hidden ingredient is often included as a food preservative, helping extend the life of a packaged food item. However, Hansmann says there is growing evidence that this preservative is linked to certain types of cancer.
4. **High fructose corn syrup**—This ingredient, is simply a fancy name for sugar and may be contributing to the growing diabetes epidemic in the U.S. Watch ingredient labels for anything ending in "-ose," which are different forms of sugar. Look closely—there can often be three to four such ingredients in one food item.

Hansmann says, "Many chronic diseases are preventable with a proper diet. You just need to build in a little extra preparation time and make certain your family is getting a properly balanced diet. Making meal preparation fun by including family members can make it seem less of a chore and teach good nutrition, at the same time."