



Eating Together - Eating Well: Healthy Meals for Busy Families

Fact Sheet FS1092



Cooperative Extension

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Making Meals a Family Affair

The benefits of family meals are abundant. Families are more likely to eat a nutritious meal when most or all of the family eats together. Families who eat at home have control of portion sizes and ingredient choices. Children who eat with their families are likely to consume more fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. They are also less likely to smoke, drink and use illegal drugs during their teen years. Enjoying meals together enhances family communication and improves manners, too. And, of course, there is a lifetime of positive memories that sharing meals together creates.

Busy schedules, long commutes, homework, evening sports events and other commitments have nibbled away at family meal time. Today, home-cooked meals are becoming rare. Some families go through a whole week without actually sitting around the table together. Meals have become something of a “grab and go” affair. This means that there are fewer opportunities for parents to interact with their children.

The family meal does not have to be a formal dinner. A family meal can be breakfast or even lunch. In fact, nutrition experts say that family meals don't even have to be enjoyed around a table. The important factor is to eat together. If your schedule won't accommodate a family meal around the kitchen table, opt for something different. In warm months, plan a picnic lunch before or after a game; have lunch at the park; plan a meal with grandparents or friends; have family cook-outs.

How can you preserve family mealtime despite a busy schedule? Here are a few simple tips to whip up nutritious and delicious family fare in a flash. With a little creativity and planning ahead it is easy to make a healthy dinner in fewer than 30 minutes.

Make Healthy Eating Happen

Step 1: Get Ready

Involve all family members in menu planning. Give each person the chance to talk about their food likes and dislikes, favorite recipes, and what they'd like to see on the family menu. Give family members tasks such as helping out with shopping for food, unpacking groceries, setting the table, or cooking. Brainstorm a list of meal ideas and write them down so you can use them again and again.

Step 2: Plan Main Courses

Start with the “main attraction.” Decide on the main course for each meal over the coming week. Think about foods your family enjoys, your budget, the time you have to prepare the food, and nutrition. Look for chances to use leftovers from one meal to another, later in the week. Once you come up with a main course for each meal, add on side dishes (vegetables, fruit and whole-grain side dishes such as brown rice or whole wheat pasta) and a healthy beverage like low-fat milk or water.

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Step 3: Stock the Kitchen with Staples

Stocking the pantry, refrigerator, and freezer is a good habit to get into. Keep a few essential ingredients on hand to make it easy to prepare a quick and tasty meal. Check out these sites for tips on stocking up with staple foods:

RCE Fact Sheet, "Home Storage of Foods Part I, Refrigerator and Freezer" njaes.rutgers.edu/pubs/publication.asp?pid=FS273

RCE Fact Sheet, "Home Storage of Foods Part II - Pantry" njaes.rutgers.edu/pubs/publication.asp?pid=FS274

Step 4: Cooking Made Easy

Try these strategies to spend less time preparing and more time enjoying a family meal:

- Save prep time with packaged, ready-to-eat fresh vegetables, such as baby carrots, salad mixes, and chopped or shredded broccoli and cauliflower.
- Use frozen vegetables to make a stir-fry. Add skinless chicken. Serve on top of quick brown rice, whole wheat pasta or noodles with side of garlic bread.
- Cook vegetables on the grill. Drizzle them with olive oil and seasoning and wrap in aluminum foil, or place in a foil tray to cut down on clean-up time.
- Soups are easy to make and can be nutritious, especially if you add vegetables or beans. You can use canned or packet soup as a base and add your own herbs and spices, too.
- Try making fried rice or risotto, or mix cooked rice with leftover vegetables and meat. Use quick cook rice to decrease the cooking time.
- Canned chicken and fish (like tuna), packed in water, are great cupboard stand-bys. Tuna noodle casserole is a healthy one-dish meal if prepared with fat free cream of mushroom soup and reduced fat parmesan cheese; add vegetables on the side to make it complete.
- Mix kidney or refried beans, taco seasoning and a bit of salad in a taco shell or roll up in a whole wheat wrap for a quick, nutritious meal.
- Use a crock pot or slow cooker for quick and convenient casseroles. Turkey breast in a crock pot makes a healthy, easy meal. Just place the turkey in the crock pot, cover $\frac{3}{4}$ with fat-free turkey gravy, cover and cook on low for seven hours. Before serving, drain gravy from crock pot. Complete the meal with sides of mashed potatoes, steamed broccoli and freshly heated gravy.

Try these websites for quick and easy recipes:

- lancaster.unl.edu/food/ciq.shtml
- <http://healthyrecipes.oregonstate.edu/recipes>
- <http://www.rd.com/family-dinner-main-dishes>

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Vegetable "Fried" Rice (by Manjula Malladi)

Here's a healthy twist on a "take-out favorite!"

Ingredients:

- 2 cups rice
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup onion, finely chopped
- 2 cups mixed vegetables, fresh or frozen (cut green beans/carrots/peas)
- 3 cloves garlic (chopped or minced)
- 3 tablespoon vegetable oil or/butter
- $\frac{1}{4}$ inch cinnamon stick
- 6 cloves
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt 3 cups water

In a pan...

1. Heat vegetable oil in a pan. Add cinnamon, cloves, chopped garlic and sauté for 1 minute.
2. Add onion and sauté until it turns light brown; add vegetables and sauté for 5 minutes until tender.
3. Add rice and water to the pan and cook until done, approximately 15 minutes.

In rice cooker...

Follow steps 1-2; add rice, water, sautéed vegetables and turn the rice cooker on.

Nutritional Information per $\frac{1}{2}$ cup serving:

Calories: 234	Carbohydrates: 41 g
Total Fat: 6g	Cholesterol: 0
Saturated Fat: 0.7g	Dietary Fiber: 4g
Sodium: 159 mg	Protein: 5 g