



## 4 Tasty Ways to Slow Down and Enjoy Dinner

A relaxed family dinner offers real benefits for adults and children. First, there is the weight advantage. Several studies in different countries have confirmed that leisurely eating leads to feeling fuller with less food. Adults who eat more slowly tend to consume fewer calories at mealtime and to have lower weights. Then, there is the positive effect that family mealtimes can have on children. When families eat five or more meals together per week, young people tend to have healthier weights, more success in school, fewer eating problems, lower substance abuse rates, and less depression. Want to give your family all these advantages? Here are four ways to make mealtimes matter.

### **Give your family meals the time and attention they deserve.**

It takes approximately 20 minutes from the time you start eating for your brain to send out signals of fullness. Give your family the gift of leisurely eating by allowing at least 25 to 30 minutes for an evening meal wherever you eat. Whether you are eating around your kitchen table, dining at a nice restaurant, or having a picnic at the ballpark, allowing plenty of time to enjoy the meal will give everyone the chance to refuel and recharge in the midst of a hectic schedule.

### **Get the whole family involved in dinner - from start to finish.**

The evening meal doesn't have to be one person's responsibility. Even very young children like being involved in planning and preparing healthful meals. Some family mealtime benefits may actually develop when children understand that they play an important role in the process. Assign age-appropriate jobs, like choosing the fruit for dessert, mixing pre-cut vegetables into a salad, setting the table with unbreakable dishes/glasses, or clearing the dishes afterwards.

### **Create a pleasant, distraction-free zone at the dinner table.**

Of all the things that can quickly improve mealtime atmosphere, this is undoubtedly the most important. Ask the whole family to turn off their electronic gizmos (TV, DVD, PDA, computer, radio, MP3 player, and non-emergency cell phones) for just 30 minutes. Background music is fine - at a low volume. The goal is to provide a relatively quiet time to enjoy food and being together. A low stress mealtime environment helps to control overeating and to improve digestion after eating.

### **Make family conversations the centerpiece of your time together.**

Pleasant conversations make good meals even better. They help young children expand their vocabulary and other language skills. They help adults learn what is really going on in the lives of young people. They help everyone feel more secure and connected in a confusing and often overwhelming world. For new ideas on what to talk about at the table, download ERM's free April 2007 conversations card at: [www.eatrightmontana.org/eatrighthealthyfamilies.htm](http://www.eatrightmontana.org/eatrighthealthyfamilies.htm)

**Need some help with planning healthy menus?** Visit USDA's totally new, totally free MyPyramid menu planning tool at [www.mypyramidtracker.gov/planner/](http://www.mypyramidtracker.gov/planner/). Using your age, gender, weight, height, and level of physical activity, the planner assesses how balanced your current eating habits are - and offers small changes to help tip the scales in a healthier direction. **MyPyramid Menu Planner** is designed for busy people who want to track both their calorie intake and the quality of their food choices - and then make realistic improvements rather than resorting to extreme diets.