

family ties

There's much more to a family meal than simply filling empty bellies. Research shows that sitting down together for dinner every night has a multitude of benefits ranging from children with improved social skills and table manners to better overall health. With nutrition and obesity reaching epidemic proportions and the work-life balance tipping in favour of employers, enjoying dinner together has never been more important. Find out how to make a happy family meal part of your daily routine. Eva Maria Bobbert reports.

Did you know?

According to food historian Margaret Visser, family meals are a custom dating back two million years when hunters and gatherers would return to camp and divide up the food with their fellows. In a 2008 study led by Dr Rebecca Huntley of Ipsos Australia, 86 per cent of families surveyed said eating a meal together was extremely or very important, but in an increasingly busy world this ritual has become harder than ever to squeeze into time-poor schedules. But the rewards are worth the effort – research shows that socialising as a family unit is a crucial part of fostering a sense of togetherness and good communication.

Beef stroganoff

Prep 10 min | Cook 25 min | Serves 4

- 2 tsp oil
- 500g lean beef strips
- 1 large onion, sliced
- 1 cup sliced mushrooms
- 1 packet Continental Beef Stroganoff

Recipe Base

- 1¼ cups water
- 2 tbs sour cream
- fettuccine pasta, to serve
- steamed broccoli and snow peas, to serve

- 1 Heat oil in a large frying pan and brown beef, onion and mushrooms.
- 2 Combine recipe base and water, add to beef and stir until boiling.

3 Cover and simmer gently for 20 minutes or until beef is cooked, stirring occasionally.

4 Stir in sour cream before serving with fettuccine, steamed broccoli and snow peas.

Fresh tip: Look out for the range of Continental Classics Recipe Bases in store at your local Woolworths supermarket.



Family time

"If food and family mealtimes are a priority, you will organise your life to make sure it happens," says Dr Rebecca Huntley, author of the Ipsos Australia White Paper '*Because Family Mealtimes Matter*'. "We make time to get on Facebook, to get our nails done or to watch two hours of footy on TV, so time is a very elastic concept. It depends on your priorities." It doesn't need to be a formal meal around a dining table - the point is to gather together and enjoy each other's company. "You might not sit down to discuss the meaning of life, it might just be a de-brief and an opportunity to focus on each other," says Dr Huntley who conducted this research on behalf of *Continental*. Busy, conflicting schedules can make it difficult to have everyone home at the same time. "Teenagers are often at friend's houses and toddlers who can't sit still or are fussy eaters can make the experience less than pleasant, but the main thing is to persevere regardless of the difficulty," says Dr Huntley.

Engaging other members of the family in shopping for ingredients, preparing the meal and cleaning up afterwards is a great way of encouraging them to become more interested in family meal times. If it's difficult to get everyone together during the week, make weekends special by setting aside time for brunch together or packing a family picnic in summer.

Turn off the television

Research shows technology often interferes with meal times. According to Dr Huntley's study, 60 per cent of families usually have the television on during meals – often no-one is actually watching but the consequences of such distractions can be far-reaching. A case study found if a family eats together three or less times a week, they're also more likely to have the television on during meals, have less conversation and report a greater deal of family tension. But television itself isn't necessarily a problem. "It can be a bonding experience – having a TV dinner night can be a fun thing you do together one night a week," says Dr Huntley. "There's nothing wrong with the family sitting around eating a meal and talking about the cooking show they're watching if it brings them together."

Healthy attitude

A Harvard study in 2000 showed that eating family dinners together most days of the week was associated with eating healthier foods. Families that ate together regularly were found to consume higher amounts of important nutrients, such as calcium, fibre, iron, vitamins B6 and B12 and C and E and lower overall levels of fat.

The simple act of eating together also improves your knowledge of your child's food choices and the amount they generally eat. "There's also the potential to open them up to new tastes but on busy weeknights it's often better to have a revolving set of meals that you know how to cook and that you know everyone will like," says Dr Huntley. "Nobody wants table dramas so it's often best to keep weekday meals predictable."

Talk it over

Jamie Oliver once said that "If you got everyone to eat round the table two or three times a week you'd get a drop in the divorce rate." He makes a good point – eating together opens up an opportunity to communicate like no other. "Dinner is often the warm-up where everyone talks about their day," says Dr Huntley. "We might have the best conversations after mealtimes when we're cleaning up or having a cup of tea. It's a particularly important process if you live with teenagers as they tend not to rush into opening up emotionally to their parents." According to Dr Huntley's research, mealtimes teach children essential conversation and listening skills that they will benefit from in later life. "Food is a central part of the adult world, from doing business over lunch to socialising with friends," says Dr Huntley. "That essential human contact of sitting, appreciating a meal, talking to someone and focusing on them is something that they'll take beyond the home."

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Continental cook-in-bag honey BBQ chicken with roast vegetables

Prep 10 min | Cook 40-45 min | Serves 4

- 8 chicken drumsticks
- 1 packet Continental Cook-in-Bag Honey BBQ Seasoning
- 8 small potatoes
- 400g pumpkin, peeled and cut into medium sized chunks
- steamed green beans, to serve

1 Preheat oven to 180 °C. Place 8 chicken drumsticks, potatoes and pumpkin into roasting bag. Add recipe base.

2 Knot bag loosely and shake gently, pierce the top of the bag twice with a fork for steam to escape. Place on a baking tray so chicken pieces are in a single layer.

4 Roast in centre of oven for 40-45 minutes or until cooked.

5 Carefully cut bag open to avoid escaping steam, transfer chicken to serving dish and pour over any remaining juices to flavour. Serve with steamed green beans.

Fresh tip: If you like your chicken crispy, cut open the top of the bag after cooking, and put back in the oven for a further 15 minutes.



THE MODERN FAMILY

- Habits take several weeks to form, so do whatever it takes to get everyone to join together at the dinner table every night – it will have become a habitual ritual before you know it.
- If your family is more comfortable eating together informally on the sofa than at a set table, then go lounge. The point is to sit together and enjoy sharing a meal.
- Use meal times as a valuable opportunity to find out what's happening in everyone's day. Sharing information about what's going on in your lives leads to better understanding of each other and closer relationships.
- Turn off the mobile and blackberry and don't bring your laptop to the table - outside disruptions break up conversation.
- For younger kids, make dinner time fun every now and then. Pretend to go camping in the lounge room or backyard. Or let them help you cook and make it a lesson.