

Encouraging Family Mealtimes: Topic of the Month

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With the ever-growing reliance on technology controlling many aspects of our everyday lives, it has never been more important to promote family mealtimes than it is today. Families must compete with work, school, and other stressors of everyday life; they may find it hard to sit down together for a meal.

Benefits of family mealtimes

- Eat more nutritious foods; a family can explore new foods together.
- Model healthy habits; children learn best from their caregivers.
- Eat the right amount; structured mealtimes aid in portion control.
- Time together helps a family bond and build strong relationships.
- Create a sense of security; routines set the expectation of time together.
- Develop social skills; children learn to socialize (communicate) with others.
- Learn about one’s culture; pass down family values, traditions, and foods.

Family mealtimes are described as everyone in a home sitting down to enjoy a meal together. In some families, this may be two individuals, while in others, it may be multiple members, close friends, or extended family. Regardless of what makes up one’s “family”, family mealtimes have been shown to increase the health and happiness of each member. Eating meals together has been associated with developing a positive relationship with food.

By creating the routine of regular family mealtimes, caregivers teach children what is expected. Children thrive on consistency; this can help eliminate the power struggle that comes with many daily activities. Additionally, by including everyone in the meal preparation, children learn new skills as they master the tasks assigned to them.

The family mealtime is considered an instrumental part of strengthening families, improving nutrition, and facilitating child development.

WIC's role

The role of WIC is to safeguard the health of low-income women, infants, and children up to age five who are at nutrition risk. It is easy to feel like participants arrive at WIC only to receive the benefits of the food package. To begin to understand our participants and their needs, it is important to establish a connection and to gain their trust. Asking for help can leave participants feeling vulnerable. We want participants to feel safe to share information and know that everything will be kept confidential.

The questions asked during the nutrition assessment may feel intrusive to some participants. Our ability to offer support is limited to the knowledge we gain during the assessment process. WIC does this by completing the nutrition assessment and then providing education that best fits an individual's needs.

We can best support our participants by:

- Creating a safe and welcoming environment.
- Asking questions and listening without judgment.
- Affirming responses and reflecting by acknowledging concerns.
- Providing appropriate support based on an individualized need.

Questions to ask participants

Ask the right questions when completing the nutrition assessment to determine how best to support the family. Open-ended questions help get the participant talking and increase the opportunity to share information that best fits their needs.

- What makes up your family? (What does your family look like?)
- Who does the shopping and cooking for your family?
- Do you have food restrictions for any members of your family?
- What does a typical mealtime look like for your family?
- What makes you the happiest about mealtimes at home?
- Tell me what makes mealtime challenges?
- What would help make family mealtimes more manageable?
- How often could you plan regular mealtimes for your family to enjoy together?

Resources to offer support

Finding the right resources for families to make mealtime a reality is essential. Once staff have identified where the family is struggling, it will be easier to direct them to the appropriate resource. Some examples include:

- **Education:**
 - WIC [Nutrition and Your Family](#) education cards- Enjoy Family Meals, Feed with Confidence, and Mealtime Routines.
 - [WIChealth.org- Health eKitchen](#) Meal Planner, [WIChealth.org Lessons for the Minnesota WIC Program](#).
 - The Family Dinner Project- [Benefits of Family Dinners](#).
 - Ellyn Satter Institute (ESI)- [Family Meals Focus](#).
 - USDA Choose My Plate- [Families](#).
 - Healthychildren.org (AAP)- [Benefits of Family Meals: Eat Together, Thrive Together](#).
- **Statewide resources:**
 - Minnesota [Food and Nutrition](#) Assistance Programs
 - Apply for benefits easily online: [MNbenefits.mn.gov](#).
- **Community resources:**
 - [Minnesota Food Pantries](#)
 - [Second Harvest Heartland- Find Food Now](#)
 - [Feeding America- Find Your Local Foodbank](#)

Tips for families

Making dinner time fun and rewarding is one strategy to get members to the table and keep them there! For many families, offering tips will be adequate to get them started or keep them going.

- Make mealtime a priority by developing a routine.
- Any food shared can be a family meal; it doesn't have to be "healthy" or "homemade" to be called a meal.
 - A frozen pizza and a glass of milk are also a meal. Add some cut-up vegetables or fruit to boost the nutritional value.
- Involve each member in meal planning, preparation, and clean-up.
- Find a space where you can enjoy mealtimes together.
 - No table, no problem. Grab a blanket and turn mealtime into a picnic on the floor.
- Turn off technology to help keep the focus on your time together.

- Keep conversation light and stress-free; allow each member time to talk.
 - [The Family Dinner Project-Conversations](#) has some great tips to get the family talking.
- Try not to stress when food is refused; just focus on your time together.
- Don't watch the clock; take your time and enjoy your meal!

Staff exercise

When sharing resources with participants, it is important to be familiar with what you are offering. Take the time to read through the WIC nutrition education cards, log into WIChealth.org, and be aware of resources available to families in your geographical area.

Often, what holds families back from routine family mealtimes can be a lack of food in the home or limited time to prepare meals! WIC can use the many resources available to assist families in meeting their goals.

Exercise #1

Read through the nutrition education cards relating to improving family mealtimes. Also, make sure you can direct participants to the location of the nutrition education materials on their computer, tablet, or mobile device (**HINT**: WIC app).

Exercise #2

Log onto wichealth.org and explore lessons available to participants that pertain to making mealtimes easier. Also, make sure you direct participants to the location of wichealth.org from their computer, tablet, or mobile device (**HINT**: WIC app).

Exercise #3

Do some research; find out what services are available to participants in your geographical area that could improve their access to food. To best serve participants, be sure you understand what is expected when they call or apply for these services so you can share this information with them as well.

Finally, share what you have learned!

Once you have determined how best you can support the participant and their family, share the information you have learned. Additionally, when you learn about new or existing resources for families, be sure to pass them along to your co-workers.

References - complete listing of hyperlinks:

[Nutrition and Your Family](#)

(<https://www.health.state.mn.us/people/wic/nutrition/tips.html#NaN>)

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[WIChealth.org](https://www.wichealth.org/) (https://www.wichealth.org/)

[Health eKitchen](https://www.wichealth.org/Member/HealthEKitchen/overview) (https://www.wichealth.org/Member/HealthEKitchen/overview)

[WIChealth.org Lessons for the Minnesota WIC Program](https://www.health.state.mn.us/docs/people/wic/localagency/nutrition/edchoice/lessons.pdf)
(https://www.health.state.mn.us/docs/people/wic/localagency/nutrition/edchoice/lessons.pdf
)

[Benefits of Family Dinners](https://thefamilydinnerproject.org/about-us/benefits-of-family-dinners/) (https://thefamilydinnerproject.org/about-us/benefits-of-family-dinners/)

[Family Meals Focus](https://www.ellynsatterinstitute.org/practice-resources/family-meals-focus/) (https://www.ellynsatterinstitute.org/practice-resources/family-meals-focus/)

[Families](https://www.myplate.gov/life-stages/families) (https://www.myplate.gov/life-stages/families)

[Benefits of Family Meals: Eat Together, Thrive Together](https://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/family-dynamics/Pages/family-meals-eat-together-thrive-together.aspx)
(https://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/family-dynamics/Pages/family-meals-eat-together-thrive-together.aspx)

[Food and Nutrition](https://mn.gov/dhs/people-we-serve/adults/economic-assistance/food-nutrition/programs-and-services/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program.jsp) (https://mn.gov/dhs/people-we-serve/adults/economic-assistance/food-nutrition/programs-and-services/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program.jsp)

[MNbenefits.mn.gov](https://mnbenefits.mn.gov/) (https://mnbenefits.mn.gov/)

[Minnesota Food Pantries](https://www.foodpantries.org/st/minnesota) (https://www.foodpantries.org/st/minnesota)

[Second Harvest Heartland- Find Food Now](https://www.2harvest.org/find-food?utm_source=chatgpt.com) (https://www.2harvest.org/find-food?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

[Feeding America- Find Your Local Foodbank](https://www.feedingamerica.org/find-your-local-foodbank) (https://www.feedingamerica.org/find-your-local-foodbank)

[The Family Dinner Project-Conversations](https://thefamilydinnerproject.org/conversation/) (https://thefamilydinnerproject.org/conversation/)

Minnesota Department of Health - WIC Program, 625 Robert St. N, PO BOX 64975, ST PAUL, MN 55164-0975; 1-800-657-3942, health.wic@state.mn.us, www.health.state.mn.us; to obtain this information in a different format, call: 1-800-657-3942.

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