

## Turn mealtime into healthy family time



>> Sharing meals together as a family offers both social and nutritional benefits.

nutritionist with the National Institutes of Health's Division of Nutrition Research Coordination.

Research shows that families that eat together have better diets because they consume more nutrients via calcium-rich foods, fruits, vegetables and whole grains, Fisher says.

"Sharing meals provides an opportunity for parents to model

healthy diet and there are lots of different types of foods that can fit into a healthy diet," Fisher says.

Fisher recommends families prepare one meal for everyone and adjust portion sizes to meet the nutrient needs of each family member. She says that parents shouldn't worry about pleasing every family member with each meal.

"It's important to consider preferences, but you don't have to limit the menu only to foods that are readily accepted," Fisher says. "Both children and adults can learn to eat unfamiliar foods with repeat exposure.

However, it's important to be flexible when

preparing meals. So sometimes if a child doesn't like one aspect of a meal, you can always put the sauce on the side...you can try to work around some preferences."

Fisher says some parents may avoid getting their kids involved in preparing meals because they think it will take too much time or cause a mess. But she says

there are many ways to get younger kids involved if you give them age-appropriate tasks.

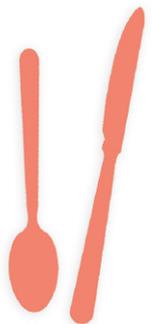
"You can ask kids to set the table, help measure ingredients or even ask them to sample the final dish before serving," Fisher says. "These are all just examples of ways that everyone can play a role."

Eating together as a family isn't just about healthier eating.

It's also about the social experience. For children, conversations during meal time can lead to lessons in sharing, taking turns and having table manners. It's also a time for family members to bond and catch up on their lives.

"Shared meal experiences can improve family communication and connect them at all stages of life," Fisher says.

>> For more ideas for healthy family meals, visit [www.dnrc.nih.gov](http://www.dnrc.nih.gov)



By Natalie McGill

**B**etween work, school and other activities, it may be hard for your family to find time to spend together. Meals such as dinner may be the only times your family can be in one place at the same time. That's why it's important to set aside time to not only eat meals together as a family but to get the whole family involved in preparing them, too.

Research shows there are both nutritional and social benefits to sharing meals as a family, says Rachel Fisher, MPH, MS, RD, a

good eating behavior and can create a positive environment for introducing new foods," Fisher says.

Parents can get the ball rolling by asking family members if there's a specific meal, side dish or new vegetable they would like to try, Fisher says. When planning the meal, families are encouraged to use a

combination of fruits, vegetables and small portions of lean protein and grains, while limiting sodium and added sugars, she says.

"Getting input from all members of the family gives everyone a sense of ownership in the meal planning process," Fisher says.

Families should lean toward choosing foods that are easy to prepare when things get busy. Frozen vegetables, for example, are good as a side dish or for use with pastas or casseroles, and can also be stored for longer periods of time than fresh vegetables, Fisher says.

"It's important to remember that there's not a single prescription for a



### Get free healthy, family-friendly recipes

Parents who need help planning and preparing healthy meals can use [ChooseMyPlate.gov](http://ChooseMyPlate.gov) as a guide. The U.S. Department of Agriculture website uses dietary advice to help you and your family follow a healthy diet.

Some U.S. health agencies also offer free, family-friendly recipes on their websites. Parents looking for healthy recipes can visit [www.whatscooking.fns.usda.gov](http://www.whatscooking.fns.usda.gov) to search for recipes that appeal to kids and print their own family cookbook.

The National Heart Lung and Blood Institute, at <https://healthyeating.nhlbi.nih.gov>, also offers free, downloadable cookbooks on healthy dinners, family meals and other topics.

