

A Review of Associations Between Family or Shared Meal Frequency and Dietary and Weight Status Outcomes Across the Lifespan

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To summarize the research literature on associations between family meal frequency and dietary outcomes as well as weight status across the lifespan.

Methods: Reviewed literature of family or shared meals with dietary and weight outcomes in youth, adults, and older adults.

Results: Across the lifespan, eating with others, particularly family, is associated with healthier dietary outcomes. Among children and adolescents, these findings appear to be consistent for both boys and girls, whereas mixed findings are seen by gender for adult men and women. The findings of associations between family or shared meals and weight outcomes across the lifespan are less consistent and more complicated than those of dietary outcomes.

Conclusions and Implications: Now is the time for the field to improve understanding of the mechanisms involved in the positive associations seen with family meal frequency, and to move forward with implementing interventions aimed at increasing the frequency of, and improving the quality of, food served at family meals, and evaluating their impact. Given the more limited findings of associations between family or shared meals and weight outcomes, capitalizing on the positive benefits of family and shared meals while addressing the types of foods served, portion sizes, and other potential mechanisms may have a significant impact on obesity prevention and reduction. Future research recommendations are provided.

Key Words: family meals, shared meals, dietary outcomes, weight status, lifespan (*J Nutr Educ Behav.* 2014;46:2-19.)

INTRODUCTION

Over the past 2 decades, the scientific literature and popular press have focused considerable attention on patterns of food consumption and factors influencing dietary intake. Much of this focus has to do with the proliferation of options for consumers (eg, increased fast-food availability), the low percentages of youth and adults meeting dietary recommendations,¹ and the high rates of obesity.^{2,3} Scientists and the general population are interested in identifying causes of poor dietary intake and obesity and

particular subpopulations that may need targeted interventions. An area of study that has received particular attention is the potential benefits of family meals and eating together with others with regard to dietary outcomes. Reviews reported to date have assessed associations between family meals and dietary outcomes for children and adolescents; however, no systematic reviews have included adults to fully address these associations across the lifespan. Relative to the sizeable literature on dietary outcomes, less research has examined how family meals are

associated with more distal outcomes such as weight status, and existing findings are less consistent. Thus, using Life Course Theory (LCT) as a guide, the present review summarized the research literature on associations between the frequency of sharing mealtimes and dietary outcomes as well as weight status across the lifespan to draw attention to knowledge gaps and provide guidance for future studies. The aim of this comprehensive descriptive report was to identify overarching themes to facilitate future research.

Although family meals have been defined in a variety of ways in the literature (eg, how often most or all family members shared a meal together, “regular” family dinners), a common thread across assessments of family meals is that various family members are together, sharing a meal. This is particularly true in the literature on meal patterns of children and adolescents. Furthermore,

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most studies either assess “meals” globally or “dinner.” Furthermore, when the population of focus is adults, the literature is more likely to describe commensal meals or meals eaten with other people, because eating companions could include one's own children, spouse, significant other, or non-family members. As with family meals, commensal eating is the shared mealtime experience shaped by social relationships.⁴

The goals of the present review were to provide an overview of family or shared meals and to describe how they are associated with dietary and weight outcomes, using a definition with sufficient flexibility to allow for the inclusion of literature on adults of all ages. Thus, in addition to meals eaten with members of a family unit, the present review provides a review of literature in adult populations regarding associations between eating in groups (and alone, if that was the comparison) with dietary and weight outcomes. Furthermore, the focus of this report is on family meal “frequency”; studies that did not assess frequency as a main predictor of dietary or weight outcomes are not included. That being said, the importance of the family meal context is appreciated, and this review provides information and commentary about demographic characteristics and contextual issues such as the complexity of household configurations, meal sources, and mealtime environments that have been identified in the literature and appear to affect the associations between family meal frequency and dietary and weight outcomes. The discussion of these contextual issues provides a description of potential mechanisms of how family meal frequency affects dietary and weight outcomes and may inform future research and expand family meals research beyond mealtime frequency.

As recommended by the National Institutes of Health Obesity Research Task Force,⁵ this review used an LCT approach that provides an understanding of how health develops over a lifetime and across populations.⁶ Life Course Theory is population-focused and emphasizes social determinants of health, which makes it useful in the context of family meals and associations with dietary

intake and weight status across the lifespan. In particular, as described by Fine and Kotelchuck,⁶ LCT considers concepts of *timing* (ie, how often meals are consumed during specific developmental periods, including childhood, adolescence, young and middle adulthood, and older adulthood), *environment* (ie, the context of meals with family or others [for older adults]), and the influence of risk and protective factors on *lifelong development* (ie, family or shared meals and dietary intake and weight status).

METHODS

Searches in PubMed and OVID Medline were conducted from June to August, 2012 using the key words “family meals” and “commensal eating” to identify relevant peer-reviewed studies. Identified studies were included in this review if they met the following inclusion criteria: (1) publication in the past 2 decades, to allow a focus on the most current literature on the potential benefits of family meals/commensal eating; (2) measurement of the frequency of family meals in child, adolescent, or young/middle adult samples or frequency of eating alone in late adulthood samples; and (3) inclusion of dietary or weight outcomes. The reference lists of included studies were also reviewed to ensure all relevant studies were retrieved. All articles of children and adolescents were reviewed by JAF, NL reviewed all articles of adults, and MH reviewed all articles of older adults. In addition, DN, who is familiar with this literature in several populations, assisted with article review.

For the 4 reviews and 23 additional studies meeting inclusion criteria, the following information was systematically extracted: (1) sample characteristics (eg, size, age, location of study); (2) study design; (3) measure of family meals or eating alone; (4) outcomes measures; and (5) findings for dietary and weight outcomes. Table 1 lists the extracted information, with the studies arranged in chronological order and grouped by sample age. Several of the included articles were reviews of the literature regarding family meals and dietary outcomes among youth,⁷⁻¹⁰ and rather than

repeating the full details of these studies, summaries and key highlights are provided. However, pertinent research studies that were not included in these reviews are included in the present review to account for review-specific selection bias and for articles published post-review. The present review is divided into 3 age groups: (1) studies of children and adolescents (through the high school years), (2) studies of young and middle adults (primarily age 18 years to the mid-fifties), and (3) older adults (most participants were in their seventies; however, a few samples also included some middle-aged participants). Each section starts with a summary of the *numbers* and *types* of studies describing family or shared meal frequency and dietary and weight outcomes, followed by a description of the findings. Although all relevant primary source articles are cited within the text, to limit redundancy, Table 1 includes details of the review articles (with citations but not details for the primary sources) and details of articles that were not included in the 4 previous reviews. Limitations of these studies across both outcomes are then described, as well as a brief summary of the literature for each age grouping.

Childhood and Adolescence

Literature. The earliest research describing the associations between family meal frequency and dietary outcomes among youth included 3 large-scale, cross-sectional studies in the United States in the early 2000s.¹¹⁻¹³ The findings from these studies were reviewed by Neumark-Sztainer and colleagues in 2006.⁷ The family meal frequency and dietary outcomes literature reviewed by Woodruff and Hanning⁸ in 2008 included the same 3 studies as well as 2 additional studies from Canada and assessed study quality.^{14,15} In 2010, Neumark-Sztainer and colleagues⁹ described the contributions of 4 adolescent-focused articles with outcomes related to diet and/or weight status from Project EAT (Eating and Activity among Teens and Young Adults),^{13,16-20} a longitudinal research program that has substantially contributed to the literature on the implications of family meals for adolescents, young adults, and

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