



Research report

Family dinner frequency, settings and sources, and body weight in US adults

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary families and food systems are both becoming more dynamic and complex, and current associations between adult family meals and body mass index (BMI) are not well understood. This investigation took a new approach by examining diverse settings and sources of food for family dinners in relationship to BMI in a cross-sectional nationally representative survey of 360 US adults age 18–85 living with family members. In this sample, 89% of adults ate family dinners at least 5 days per week and almost all ate family dinners cooked and eaten at home. About half of these adults also ate family dinners at restaurants, fast food places, or ate takeout food at home, and less common were family dinners at homes of relatives or friends. Family dinners eaten at fast food places, but not other settings or sources, were significantly associated with higher BMI. Overall, adult family dinners were commonplace, usually involved home cooking, and when at fast food places may be related with higher adult body weights.

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Introduction

Family meals are currently an important institution in Western Societies, serving as normative icons for collective eating (Wilk, 2010). Growing academic research has related family meals to a variety of health outcomes, including body weight (Fulkerson, Larson, Horning, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2014; Story & Neumark-Sztainer, 2005), and the popular media is widely advocating family meals (e.g. Archambeault, 2013; Weinstein, 2005). However, the settings and sources of family meals are not well understood in contemporary households that are experiencing shifting family structures and increasingly complex food systems. The main aim of this study was to examine the frequency of family dinners reported by US adults, and to analyze whether the settings and sources of food for family dinners are associated with adult body mass index (BMI).

Norms for family meals portray them as occurring at home by a nuclear family serving “home cooked” foods (Gallegos, Dziurawiec, Fozdar, & Abernethie, 2010; McIntosh, 1999). DeVault (1991) found that parents were disappointed when they did not have “proper family meals,” and Moisis, Arnould and Price (2004) observed that home cooked food was considered “authentic” in the creation of the family. Charles and Kerr (1988) reported that families who did not eat traditional Sunday dinners were not seen as “proper families.”

Eating family meals was generally seen as healthy eating (Berge et al., 2012a). These ideals suggest that social pressures exist for family meals to occur regularly in household settings with home prepared foods.

In contrast to normative ideals, families have changed in ways that may hamper iconic family meals. Nuclear families form later in life, are smaller, more frequently involve divorce and single parents, and experience new arrangements for employment, commuting and housework (Coontz, 2005; Furstenberg, 2011; Gillis, 1996). Food systems also are undergoing many forms of reorganization and reform (Hinrichs & Lyson, 2008), and now emphasize prepared foods in diverse settings and fewer raw ingredients for home cooking (Poti & Popkin, 2011). Convenience is emphasized as a primary value in food choice (Connors, Bisogni, Sobal, & Devine, 2001), evidenced by both increasing visits to fast food establishments and the quantity of prepared foods delivered to homes (Nielsen, Siega-Riz, & Popkin, 2002). Individualized eating, where people eat alone or separate from other family members, is also occurring (Sobal & Nelson, 2003). At the same time, attention to the link between food and health has increased, and family meals have been identified as a route to healthier eating (Larson, Fulkerson, Story, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2012).

Prevalence of family meals

Reported prevalence of families eating their main daily meal together ranges from 46% to 70% across a variety of nations (Fulkerson et al., 2014; Holme, 2001; Pettinger, Holdsworth, & Gerber, 2006;

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Warde & Martens, 2000). In the US, several studies have examined family meal frequency reported by adults (e.g. Berge, Wickel, & Doherty, 2012b; Blake, Wethington, Farrell, Bisogni, & Devine, 2011; Chan & Sobal, 2011; Larson et al., 2012; Koszewski, Behrends, Nichols, Sehi, & Jones, 2011; Sobal & Hanson, 2011; Welsh, French, & Wall, 2011; Woodruff & Hanning, 2011) and the prevalence of family meals varied from about 75% (McIntosh et al., 2009) to 93% among adults in households that include family members with whom they can eat (Sobal & Hanson, 2011). Demographic predictors of adult family meal participation have been examined in prior research with inconsistent results, with at least some research finding that being older, married, less educated, working class and employed is associated with more frequent family meals (Fulkerson et al., 2014; Holme, 2001; Sobal & Hanson, 2011). The varied findings in existing studies of the adult prevalence and patterns of family meals suggest that additional analyses of family meals may provide useful information.

Settings for eating family meals

Settings for family meals are idealized as being in the home, which is the symbolic representation of a site for family activities (Valentine, 1999). However, a home meal does not guarantee it is a family meal, and a family meal does not necessarily need to be a home meal (McIntosh et al., 2009). Chan and Sobal (2011) found that over 90% of adults reported that they usually eat at least one family meal away from home in a usual week. Qualitative studies of family meals describe how family dinners often occurred in fast food restaurants (Brembeck, 2005; Traphagan & Brown, 2011) and the homes of friends and relatives (Sobal, Bove, & Rauschenbach, 2002). Several surveys found that family meals also often occurred in non-fast-food restaurants (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2012; Thornton, Crawford, & Ball, 2011). Overall, while home family meals are idealized, actual family meals appear to occur in a variety of places (Woodruff & Hanning, 2011), but the types and combinations of family meal settings have not been systematically examined. Based on these prior studies, we hypothesized that adults primarily eat family dinners at home rather than away from home, and less often eat family dinners in commercial settings such as restaurants and fast food establishments.

Sources of food for family meals

Sources of food for family meals vary, but “home cooked” foods are considered the ideal for family dinners (DeVault, 1991; Moisis et al., 2004). However, while Todd (2014) found that most family meals are prepared at home, Beck (2007) observed that most home prepared meals included some processed commercial food. Among a sample of adult women with children, 75% reported they ate meals prepared at home six or more days per week, and substantial percentages of these women also ate commercially prepared and fast food at home at least 1 day per week, and in restaurants at least 1 day per week (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2012). Other studies also find that people used a variety of sources of home prepared and externally prepared foods that were consumed both at home and away from home (Thornton et al., 2011; Woodruff & Hanning, 2011). Given these findings, we hypothesized that most adults eat family dinners that are prepared at home, but that other sources of food are also commonplace.

Adult body weight and family meals

Family meals are often promoted as eating events that provide social structures that reinforce norms through social control that promotes healthy food choices and moderate caloric intake (Ayala et al., 2007; McIntosh et al., 2009) that may, in turn, prevent over-

weight and obesity (Fruh, Fulkerson, Mulekar, Kendrick, & Clanton, 2011; Johnson, Birkett, Evens, & Pickering, 2006). However, much caloric intake occurs outside of family dinners, limiting the influence that family dinners may have on total daily consumption.

An inverse relationship between frequency of family meals and body weight has often been reported in studies of children and adolescents (Valdes, Rodriguez-Artalejo, Aguilar, Jaen-Casquero, & Royo-Bourdonada, 2012), and some studies of adults (Berge et al., 2012b; Fulkerson et al., 2014). Among US adults without children at home, no relationship between frequency of family meals and body weight was present (Sobal & Hanson, 2011). Similarly, among parents in one city, frequency of family meals was not associated with adult body weight (Berge et al., 2012a). Boutelle, Fulkerson, Neumark-Sztainer, Story and French (2007) reported that parents who ate fast food for family meals were more likely to be overweight, but there was no association between fast food for family meals and overweight among their adolescent children. Chan and Sobal (2011) found that the more often fathers reported that they ate family meals away from home the more likely they were to be overweight. These studies of family meals and adult body weight suggest that it is not clear whether and under what conditions family meals are related to adult body weight (Fulkerson et al., 2014), with gender (Chan & Sobal, 2011) and parenthood (Sobal & Hanson, 2011) being possible moderators. We hypothesized that adults who frequently eat family dinners, irrespective of setting or source, have lower BMI.

The present investigation of family meals

The present analysis examined the frequency of family dinners, their settings and sources, and their associations with BMI in a national sample of US adults. Prior studies primarily used data that do not clearly identify the settings and sources of family meals, like time use data (Bertrand & Schanzenbach, 2009), they did not explicitly ask where or what food is eaten in surveys about family meals (Fulkerson et al., 2014), and they examined only a few settings other than home and few alternate sources than home prepared (e.g. Fulkerson et al., 2011; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2012). We explicitly examine multiple family dinner settings and sources, and their associations with adult BMI to advance knowledge about family meals and their associations with adult body weight.

Methods

Design and sample

Data about adult family dinners were collected in the Cornell National Social Survey (CNSS), a pilot-tested cross-sectional telephone survey conducted by the Survey Research Institute (SRI). The CNSS is an omnibus survey that included questions about many diverse topics other than family meals, and among the other questions we were able to include a set of items about family meals and their sources and settings. The CNSS survey was conducted in the fall of 2010 using random digit dialing to select a representative sample of households with listed and unlisted telephone numbers in the continental US provided by GENESYS Sampling Systems (Horsham, PA, USA). Within each contacted household, the adult with the most recent birthday was sampled. Interviews were conducted in English by trained interviewers using computer-assisted interviewing software. The final sample size for this portion of the CNSS was 499 completed interviews, with a cooperation rate (interviews/potential interviews) of 58% (Xian & Miller, 2010). Distributions of demographic characteristics of this random national CNSS sample were congruent with those of US national data collected by the US Census (Xian & Miller, 2010). This study was exempted from review by the University Institutional Review Board (IRB).

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