

**The power of dining together** (*SCMP* By Anne Fishel 20 January 2015)

1. As a family therapist, I often have the impulse to tell families to go home and have dinner together rather than spending an hour with me. And 20 years of research in North America, Europe and Australia back up my enthusiasm for family dinners. It turns out that sitting down for a nightly meal is great for the brain, the body and the spirit. And that nightly dinner doesn't have to be a gourmet meal that took three hours to cook, nor does it need to be made with organic produce.
2. For starters, researchers found that for young children, dinnertime conversation boosts vocabulary even more than being read aloud to. The researchers counted the number of rare words – those not found on a list of 3,000 most common words – that the families used during dinner conversation. Young children learned 1,000 rare words at the dinner table, compared with only 143 from parents reading storybooks aloud. Children who have large vocabularies read and more easily.
3. Older children also reap intellectual benefits from family dinners. For school-age youngsters, regular mealtime is an even more powerful predictor of high achievement scores than time spent in school, doing homework, playing sports or doing art.
4. Other researchers reported a consistent association between family dinner frequency and teen academic performance. Adolescents who ate family meals five to seven times a week were twice as likely to get top marks in school as those who ate dinner with their families fewer than two times a week.
5. Children who eat regular family dinners also consume more fruits, vegetables, vitamins and micronutrients, as well as fewer fried foods and soft drinks. And the nutritional benefits keep paying dividends even after they grow up: young adults who ate regular family meals as teens are less likely to be obese and more likely to eat healthy foods once they live on their own.
6. Some research has even found a tie between regular family dinners and the reduction of symptoms in medical disorders, such as asthma. The benefit might be due to two possible by products of a shared family meal: lower anxiety and the chance to check in about a child's medication compliance.
7. It isn't just the presence of healthy foods that leads to all these benefits. The dinner atmosphere is also important. Parents need to be warm and engaged rather than controlling and restrictive, to encourage healthy eating in their children.
8. But all bets are off if the television is on during dinner. In one study, US preschoolers who

watched TV during dinner were likelier to be overweight by their third year of primary school. The correlation between TV – watching at dinner and obese children was also reported in Sweden, Finland and Portugal.

9. In one study of more than 5,000 teens in Minnesota, regular family dinners were associated with lower rates of depression and suicidal thoughts. A recent study found that children who had been victims of cyberbullying bounced back more readily if they had regular family dinners. Family dinners have been found to be a more powerful deterrent against high-risk teen behaviour than church attendance or good grades.
10. There are also associations between regular family dinners and good behaviour, not just the absence of bad.
11. In a New Zealand study, a higher frequency of family meals was strongly associated with positive moods in adolescents. Similarly, other researchers have shown that teens who dine regularly with their families also have a more positive view of the future, compared with those who don't.
12. What's so magical about mealtime? The real power of dinners lies in their interpersonal quality. If family members sit in stony silence, if parents yell at each other, or scold their children, family dinner won't confer positive benefits. But dinner may be the one time of the day when a parent and child can share a positive experience – a well-cooked meal, a joke or a story.