Gathering your family to enjoy a home-cooked meal may seem unrealistic when you think about everyone’s busy schedule. However, eating meals as a family has several advantages that can provide long-term benefits for all family members.

One of the advantages of cooking your own meals is that you can control the types and amounts of foods you and your family are eating. Whether your goal is to eat more balanced meals, lose weight, or lower your sodium intake, preparing meals at home gives you a better chance of meeting your nutritional goals. How? By controlling what goes into your food. Simple changes, like substituting fresh herbs for salt, or healthy oils for butter, are ways you can prepare healthier meals.

Eating meals at home also provides the chance to involve your family with meal preparation. Studies have shown that kids who help prepare meals are more likely to enjoy and consume fruits and vegetables. While it may take longer to get dinner on the table, the benefits for your kids are worth it. Visit http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/fy1259 for some age-appropriate activities to get
your child involved with meal preparation. In addition to getting a little extra help in the kitchen, this can also be a great time to talk to your child about his or her day.

Use mealt ime to teach your family about food safety. Teaching children how to wash their hands properly is a great place to start. From there, teach them how to clean fruits and vegetables, cook meats to the right temperature, and store food properly when they put it away. Knowing the basics of how to protect themselves against food-borne illnesses will benefit them now and after they leave the nest.

A traditional meal can be altered slightly to introduce your family to new foods. The kids have never had pineapple? Make a pineapple salsa and serve it with toasted pita wedges. They’ve never heard of cauliflower? Steam, mash it, and call it cauliflower mashed potatoes; or pair a new vegetable with their favorite dressing. Even if the foods aren’t loved right away, keep introducing them. The Ellyn Satter Institute has shown that it can take 12 or more tries before a child accepts a new food, so be patient. I can relate to that. My mother’s two-week streak of feeding me mango was not appealing when I was young, but now I refuse to make a smoothie without mango.

Family meals save money! After buying the ingredients you need to make a family meal, break down the cost per family member and compare it to the cost of eating out. You can cut your costs even more by introducing your family to Meatless Mondays.

In today’s hectic and diverse world, family meals may not look like a scene from Leave it to Beaver, but they don’t have to. Make your own healthy traditions. After all, at the end of the day when the table is cleared, the most important thing is having enjoyed the presence of those you love.

References


