

How Eating at Home Can Save Your Life

The slow insidious displacement of home cooked and communally shared family meals by the industrial food system has fattened our nation and weakened our family ties. In 1900, 2 percent of meals were eaten outside the home. In 2010, 50 percent were eaten away from home and one in five breakfasts is from McDonald's. Most family meals happen about three times a week, last less than 20 minutes and are spent watching television or texting while each family member eats a different microwaved "food." More meals are eaten in the minivan than the kitchen.

Research shows that children who have regular meals with their parents do better in every way, from better grades, to healthier relationships, to staying out of trouble. They are 42 percent less likely to drink, 50 percent less likely to smoke and 66 percent less like to smoke marijuana. Regular family dinners protect girls from bulimia, anorexia, and diet pills. Family dinners also reduce the incidence of childhood obesity. In a study on household routines and obesity in U.S. preschool-aged children, it was shown that kids as young as four have a lower risk of obesity if they eat regular family dinners, have enough sleep, and don't watch TV on weekdays.

We complain of not having enough time to cook, but Americans spend more time watching cooking on the Food Network than actually preparing their own meals. In his series, "Food Revolution," Jamie Oliver showed us how we have raised a generation of Americans who can't recognize a single vegetable or fruit, and don't know how to cook.

The [family dinner](#) has been hijacked by the food industry. The transformations of the American home and meal outlined above did not happen by accident. Broccoli, peaches, almonds, kidney beans and other whole foods don't need a food ingredient label or bar code, but for some reason these foods -- the foods we co-evolved with over millennia -- had to be "improved" by Food Science. As a result, the processed-food industry and industrial agriculture has changed our diet, decade by decade, not by accident but by intention.

That we need nutritionists and doctors to teach us how to eat is a sad reflection of the state of society. These are things our grandparents knew without thinking twice about them. What foods to eat, how to prepare them, and an understanding of why you should share them in family and community have been embedded in cultural traditions since the dawn of human society.

One hundred years ago all we ate was local, organic food; grass-fed, real, whole food. There were no fast-food restaurants, there was no junk food, there was no frozen food -- there was just what your mother or grandmother made. Most meals were eaten at home. In the modern age that tradition, that knowledge, is being lost.

The sustainability of our planet, our health, and our food supply are inextricably linked. The ecology of eating -- the importance of what you put on your fork -- has never been more critical to our survival as a nation or as a species. The earth will survive our self-destruction. But we may not.

Common sense and scientific research lead us to the conclusion that if we want healthy bodies we must put the right raw materials in them: real; whole, local; fresh; unadulterated; unprocessed; and chemical-, hormone- and antibiotic-free food. There is no role for foreign molecules such as trans fats and high-fructose corn syrup, or for industrially developed and processed food that interferes with our biology at every level.

That is why I believe the most important and the most powerful tool you have to change your health and the world is your fork. Imagine an experiment -- let's call it a celebration: We call upon the people of the world to join together and celebrate food for one week. For one week or even one day, we all eat breakfast and dinner at home with our families or friends. For one week we all eat only real, whole, fresh food. Imagine for a moment the power of the fork to change the world.

The extraordinary thing is that we have the ability to move large corporations and create social change by our collective choices. We can reclaim the family dinner, reviving and renewing it. Doing so will help us learn how to find and prepare real food quickly and simply, teach our children by example how to connect, build security, safety and social skills, meal after meal, day after day, year after year.

Here are some tips that will help you take back the family dinner in your home starting today.

Reclaim Your Kitchen

Throw away any foods with high fructose corn syrup, hydrogenated fats or sugar or fat as the first or second ingredient on the label. Fill your shelves with real fresh, whole, local foods when possible. And join a community support agriculture network to get a cheaper supply of fresh vegetables weekly or frequent farmers markets.

Reinstate the Family Dinner

Read Laurie David's ["The Family Dinner"](#). She suggests the following guidelines: Make a set dinnertime, no phones or texting during dinner, everyone eats the same meal, no television, only filtered or tap water, invite friends and family, everyone clean up together.

Eat Together

No matter how modest the meal, create a special place to sit down together, and set the table with care and respect. Savor the ritual of the table. Mealtime is a time for empathy and generosity, a time to nourish and communicate.

Learn How to Cook and Shop

You can make this a family activity, and it does not need to take a ton of time. Keep meals quick and simple.

Plant a Garden

This is the most nutritious, tastiest, environmentally friendly food you will ever eat.

Conserve, Compost and Recycle

Bring your own shopping bags to the market, recycle your paper, cans, bottles and plastic and start a compost bucket (and find where in your community you can share your goodies).

Invest in Food

As Alice Waters says, **food is precious**. We should treat it that way. Americans currently spend less than 10 percent of their income on food, while most Europeans spend about 20 percent of their income on food. We will be more nourished by good food than by more stuff. And we will save ourselves much money and costs over our lifetime.

To learn more tips for taking back the family dinner and using your fork to effect change in our world visit www.drhyman.com.

Now I'd like to hear from you.

Do you think the health of our planet and the health of our diet are linked? How?

Which of the steps outlined above have you taken in your own life and how have they worked for you?

What ideas do you have that will help us reclaim the family dinner and revive the tradition of eating real, whole foods?

Please share your thoughts by leaving a comment below.

To your good health,

Mark Hyman, MD

Mark Hyman, M.D. is a practicing physician, founder of [The UltraWellness Center](#), a four-time New York Times bestselling author, and an international leader in the field of [Functional Medicine](#). You can follow him on [Twitter](#), connect with him on [LinkedIn](#), watch his videos on [YouTube](#), become a fan on [Facebook](#), and subscribe to his [newsletter](#).