

# SNAP-Ed Toolkit

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## R10: Family Meals

### Framework Component

Population Results – Trends and Reductions in Disparities

### Indicator Description

Changes in frequency of family meals at the population level that reflect the cumulative effects of achieving short-, medium-, and long-term outcomes in other indicators.

### Background and Context

Family meals are a time when families can come together to eat, socialize, bond, and establish healthy norms and routines. Therefore, family meals have received much attention as a behavior that can be encouraged to improve nutrition and nutrition-related factors. It is important to note, however, that family meals are complex and contextually based. That is, while in general eating together without watching TV is beneficial to child and adolescent nutrition, simply performing the behavior might not be sufficient to improve nutrition and nutrition-related factors. Families must also have the education, resources, access, and environment necessary to serve healthy foods at meal time. The questions below are meant to measure frequency of family meals and whether or not a TV is watched during dinner time. They can be used to obtain a prevalence estimate of a group or can be used to measure change over time (e.g., pre- and posttest design after an intervention). A review of the literature found that families who report eating together three or more time per week have children and adolescents who were more likely to be in a normal weight range and have healthier dietary and eating patterns.<sup>1</sup> The literature review also highlighted that parents and caregivers generally spent more time with younger children and emphasized family mealtimes as a priority. This prioritization of family mealtimes changes in adolescence when other factors begin to emerge, such as changing work schedules for parents and caregivers, children and adolescents taking part in more afterschool activities, and adolescents' own desires to have more control of the food they choose to eat. There is less evidence that watching TV specifically during mealtime is predictive of poorer dietary intake, although some studies do find a negative association.<sup>2,3</sup> Research does show that the total hours of TV watched is associated with poorer dietary intake; a primary hypothesis for this association is that these children and adolescents are more exposed to unhealthy food advertising and therefore more likely to request and consume less healthy foods. Other forms of media or electronic devices (e.g., smart phones, mp3 players, tablets) might also be associated with lower dietary quality, but more research is needed to establish such an association.

# Outcome Measures

R10a. Families that report eating a family meal three or more times per week R10b. Families that report they “disagree” they often watch TV or other screen while eating dinner

## What to Measure

There are two core components of family meals that are measured: 1) frequency of family meals across one week; and 2) the degree to which a parent or caregiver “agrees” or “disagrees” that their family watches TV during dinner.

## Population

Families with children and/or adolescents; although these are family-level questions, only parents or caregivers complete the questions.

## Surveys and Data Collection Tools

**Family Meals Frequency Questions (Adults)** During the past seven days, how many times did all, or most, of your family living in your house eat a meal together?

Response choices: a. Never b. 1–2 times c. 3–4 times d. 5–6 times e. 7 times f. More than 7 times

Note: Once responses are collected, combine “a” and “b” into one category titled “2 times or fewer per week.” Combine options “c–f” into one category, “3 times or more per week.” In my family, we often watch TV while eating dinner.

Response choices: a. Strongly disagree b. Somewhat disagree c. Somewhat agree d. Strongly agree

Note: Once responses are collected, combine “a” and “b” into one category labeled “disagree.” Combine “c” and “d” into one category labeled “agree.” These questions were borrowed from Project EAT, administered by the University of Minnesota, School of Public Health. More information on these questions and Project Eat can be found here: <https://www.sphresearch.umn.edu/epi/project-eat/> Additional evaluation tools to measure R10 can be found in the [SNAP-Ed Library](#).

## Key Glossary Terms

N/A

## Additional Resources or Supporting Citations

Ten additional questions (below) can be asked that measure the “atmosphere” of family meals as well as rules related to family meals. These questions give more information about the quality of interactions at meal time,

the purpose of meal time, and rules related to meal time. The atmosphere of family meals as measured by these questions is associated with less disordered eating.<sup>4</sup> These questions also give a descriptive idea of the context of family meals that is not measured by the frequency of family meals question.

1. In my family, it is important that the family eats at least one meal a day together.
2. I am often just too busy to eat dinner with my family.
3. In my family, different schedules make it hard to eat meals together on a regular basis.
4. In my family, it is often difficult to find time when family members can sit down to eat a meal together.
5. In my family, we are expected to be home for dinner.
6. I enjoy eating meals with my family.
7. In my family, eating together brings people together in an enjoyable way.
8. In my family, mealtime is a time for talking with other family members.
9. In my family, dinner time is about more than just getting food, we all talk together.
10. In my family, there are rules at mealtime we are expected to follow.

The response categories for these questions are “strongly disagree,” “disagree,” “agree,” “strongly agree.” National or state-level estimates are not available for these questions; however, SNAP-Ed Implementing Agencies can incorporate the preferred questions above into their local survey administration. References: <sup>1</sup> Hammons AJ, Fiese BH. Is frequency of shared family meals related to the nutritional health of children and adolescents? *Pediatrics*. 2011;127(6):e1565–e1574. <sup>2</sup> Feldman S, Eisenberg ME, Neumark-Sztainer D, Story M. Associations between watching TV during family meal and dietary intake among adolescents. *J Nutr Educ Behav*. 2007;39(5):257-263. <sup>3</sup> Fitzpatrick E, Edmunds LS, Dennison BA. Positive effects of family dinner are undone by television viewing. *J Am Diet Assoc*. 2007;107(4):666-671. <sup>4</sup> Neumark-Sztainer D, Wall M, Story M, Fulkerson JA. Are family meal patterns associated with disordered eating behaviors among adolescents? *J Adolesc Health*. 2004;35(5):350-359.