

HEADLINE: Four simple ways to make healthy eating a shared experience

SUBHEAD: Sharing meals with others can help you make healthy choices. Get creative about getting together and find new ways to prepare and consume higher-nutrient, lower-calorie foods.

By Karen Collins, RDN

Study after study has shown the benefits of the family meal for children and teens – from healthier diets to less disordered eating. But when it comes to older adults, especially those who are single, do these same benefits apply?

Nearly one-half of all adults in the United States are single, which means that the family meal isn't part of their daily routine. But shared meals don't have to look like parents and children sitting around the table passing the green beans. Think outside the box when it comes to shared meals and discover how eating together can improve more than your dietary habits.

Older adults who eat alone are more likely to skip meals. This trend is particularly common among men, according to the latest research. At the same time, adults who eat alone tend to consume foods high in sodium and low in nutrients such as calcium, zinc and iron.

As a nutrition counselor, I've heard the same story time and time again. Many older, single adults simply find healthy eating choices too challenging. They don't feel it's worth putting in the time and effort to prepare a fresh, healthy meal just for themselves. Instead, they fall back on low-nutrient, high-calorie foods, since, after all, they aren't imposing their choices on other people.

But sharing your meals with others doesn't have to be hard work. In fact, shared meals are a great way to share the effort and learn new approaches to healthy eating.

Here are a few options to get you started:

1. Why not call a friend to try the new restaurant that just opened down the street? Prioritize those establishments that emphasize nutrition over speed and offer a variety of vegetable and whole grain options. Remember, if the portions are too large for your appetite, you can always share or take a doggy bag home for tomorrow's lunch.
2. Why not host a potluck? I'm not talking about your grandmother's potluck with sugary gelatin salads and calorie-laden chocolate cakes. Search the Internet for healthy potluck ideas and prepare to be amazed.
3. Why not start a cook-together supper club? You can plan the meal by email or gather to cook together and split the costs. Encourage others to join you by waiving any requirement for a long-term commitment and keep things positive with good communication. Added benefits include leftovers for everyone.

4. Why not just invite people you know – or even those you don't – to share a meal? Think about people you'd like to reconnect with or those who need a helping hand. There's no need to throw a fancy dinner party with a decadent five-course meal. With little planning, you can offer something simple and delicious for two or three people that costs no more than a restaurant meal for yourself. And if you cook too much, you'll have leftovers tomorrow or to freeze for next week.

Keep the following tips in mind when planning your shared meals:

- Cooking at home is linked with lower calorie intake, while eating out more often typically means higher-calorie, lower-diet quality meals. Try to make your shared meals a homemade experience.
- Branch out into Mediterranean, Asian or other plant-based cuisines for healthy eating that also will satisfy your taste buds.
- Remember that appropriate portion size is a key part of what makes a meal healthy. Do your shared meals support awareness of hunger signals and discourage excess portions?
- When eating alone, take those habits you've learned from your shared meal experiences and apply them – you can make healthy choices your everyday choices.
- Most importantly, have fun while keeping mealtime healthy by sharing your meals and your ideas.

Breaking bread with others can help you start to reframe your meal-time approach and make healthy eating choices a habit. And while sharing meals isn't a silver bullet that will break all unhealthy eating habits, it is a positive step in the right direction.