

Sharing family meals:

A picture of healthy eating and sharing family meals in Victoria

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Maintaining a healthy diet is vital for achieving optimal health; a healthy diet reduces the risk of obesity and chronic diseases such as type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, some cancers, osteoarthritis, respiratory conditions and depression¹.



Why is sharing a meal with your family important?

It is important for families and friends to connect and interact by sharing meals together², yet many find scheduling family meals difficult because of conflicting schedules. But why is this important?

- Evidence suggests that when families eat meals together:
 - they consume more nutritious food than when each member eats alone
 - meals tend to include more fruit and vegetables and less fried food and sugar-sweetened beverages³.
- Family plays an important role in shaping children's eating and physical activity patterns.
- Sharing family meals has been associated with having a healthy body weight⁴.

Previous research has also indicated that adolescents in families that share a meal at least five times each week report:

- less tobacco and alcohol use
- fewer depressive symptoms⁵.

About the VicHealth Indicators Survey



- The Survey focuses on the social determinants of health and complements other health survey work in Victoria such as the Victorian Population Health Survey.
- Data was collected through telephone interviews, and conducted between May and August 2011 in each of Victoria's 79 Local Government Areas (LGAs). A sample of 25,075 participants aged 18 and over was achieved.
- The Survey includes a pre-weight which reflects the respondents' chance of selection within the household and a population weight based on age and gender within each LGA. Analysis was performed using chi-square tests in Stata v11, with p<0.05 considered statistically significant. Only significant associations are reported here.

So what's happening in Victoria?

Over three quarters (77% [CI* 76,79]) of parents in Victoria with children aged less than 18 years reported sharing family meals at least five times per week, with a mean of 5.5 days reported.

Of those who shared family meals at least 5 times per week:

Work-life balance

Less likely to share a family meal at least five times a week are those reporting poor work-life balance [73% [71,75] vs 82% [79,84]], those reporting always or often feeling rushed and pressed for time [75% [73,77] vs 81% [79,83]], and those reporting they always or often lack time for friends and family [71% [68,73] vs 81% [79,83]].

Location of residence

Those living outside of metropolitan Melbourne, including regional [83% [80,85]], regional city [80% [77,83]] and peri-urban [81% [77,84]] areas, share meals more frequently than those living in inner [78% [71,83]], middle [75% [71,78]] and outer [77% [73,81]] metropolitan areas and in the growth suburbs [76% [72,79]].

Labour force participation

Students [83% [68,91]], homemakers [83% [79,86]] and retirees [84% [67,92]] share meals more often than those who report their current work status as employed [77% [75,78]] or unemployed [75% [59,86]].*

Wellbeing

Those who share meals at least five times per week reported higher mean wellbeing scores [79 [78,79]] compared to those who shared meals less [76 [75,77]], using the Australian Unity Personal Wellbeing Index.

Age

Those aged 25-34 [84% [81,87]] and those aged 75 and over [87% [49,98]] are more likely than any other age group to share a meal with their family at least five times per week. Those aged 18-25 are the least likely [58% [33,78]].*

Why was this research done?

The VicHealth Indicators Survey research investigated the sub-groups in the Victorian population who are more likely to be sharing a meal with their family, and linked their behaviour with other health and wellbeing indicators to provide an understanding of what is happening in the Victorian context.

This research highlights those groups most at risk of consuming evening meals that are calorie-dense and have low nutritional value.

What does this research tell us?

A high proportion of Victorian families share meals most days of the week, however those experiencing poor work-life balance, lower wellbeing, those aged 18-25 years and those living in metropolitan areas are less likely to do so.

The challenge for parents is to balance the family's busy schedule to ensure the evening meal is frequently shared together. This practice is likely to ensure a nutritious meal is consumed; it is also an opportunity for important family time that promotes connectedness and wellbeing³.

Strategies that may help address time constraints include using quick, simple, nutritious recipes with ingredients that are affordable and easily sourced, planning meals ahead of time and sharing meal preparation duties³.

For more information contact the Knowledge for Health Unit at the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth): indicators@vichealth.vic.gov.au.

References

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- * A confidence interval (CI) specifies a range of values that we would expect to contain a true value of an estimate. Lower and upper confidence intervals have been provided for each estimate within text in square brackets following any estimate (for example, 45% [44,46]).
- * It must be noted that these point estimates have large confidence intervals due to the small sample sizes.