

Systematic review of the effects of family meal frequency on psychosocial outcomes in youth.

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Abstract

OBJECTIVE: To conduct a systematic review of the effects of frequent family meals on psychosocial outcomes in children and adolescents, and to examine whether there are differences in outcomes between males and females.

DATA SOURCES: Studies were identified through a search of MEDLINE (1948 to fifth week of June 2011) and PsycINFO (1806 to first week of July 2011) using the Ovid interface. The MeSH terms and key words used both alone and in combination were family, meal, food intake, nutrition, diets, body weight, adolescent attitudes, eating behaviour, feeding behaviour, and eating disorders. Bibliographies of papers deemed relevant were also reviewed.

STUDY SELECTION: The original search yielded 1783 articles. To be included in the analysis, studies had to meet the following criteria: have been published in a peer-reviewed journal in English; involve children or adolescents; discuss the role of family meals on the psychosocial outcomes (eg, substance use, disordered eating, depression) of children or adolescents; and have an adequate study design, including appropriate statistical methods for analyzing outcome data. Fourteen papers met inclusion criteria. Two independent reviewers studied and analyzed the papers.

SYNTHESIS: Overall, results show that frequent family meals are inversely associated with disordered eating, alcohol and substance use, violent behaviour, and feelings of depression or thoughts of suicide in adolescents. There is a positive relationship between frequent family meals and increased self-esteem and school success. Studies show substantial differences in outcomes for male and female children and adolescents, with females having more positive results.

CONCLUSION: This systematic review provides further support that frequent family meals should be endorsed. All health care practitioners should educate families on the benefits of having regular meals together as a family.

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