



Setting Your Family Dinner with Dairy

by Erin McGraw

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August is Family Meals Month and for many parents, it may be much easier to forget about family meals altogether. Overscheduled lives can lead to being constantly on-the-go and feeling the need to eat on the run. While family dinners can be seen as a burdensome chore at the end of a tiring day, more American families are realizing that the benefits of time together cannot be measured by calories alone.

Enjoying shared meals offers a unique opportunity to teach children valuable lessons and positively impact their health. “Milk, cheese and yogurt pack a nutritional punch and are easy foods to add to your family meal,” states Erin McGraw, nutrition educator with the St. Louis District Dairy Council.

Why should you eat family meals together?

Many families are starved for time to spend together, and dinner may be their only time to reconnect, leave behind individual pursuits and really be present. Dinner is a time to relax, recharge, laugh, tell stories and catch up on the day’s ups and downs. Plus, it’s a great opportunity to gain crucial knowledge and skills on nutrition and the importance of healthy meals.

What are the benefits of increasing family meals?

Family meals at home are simply more nutritious. A Harvard study found that families who eat together are twice as likely to get the recommended amount of fruits and vegetables as families that don’t share mealtimes. Also, kids who eat family meals tend to consume a wider variety of foods, making them less picky eaters. “Dairy foods contain nine essential nutrients and are easily incorporated into breakfast, lunch and dinner meals. Grating and sprinkling a new flavor of cheese over vegetables or stirring yogurt into a fruit dip are simple ways kids can learn to love new foods. At the same time, it can help them reach the goal of three servings of dairy every day,” notes McGraw.

How to do it?

Make family meals a priority in the household. Focus more on being together than on making an elaborate meal. Start with small steps, such as increasing the number of family meals by one meal each week. Plan the weekly menu and make a grocery list so everyone is involved in the plan. Encourage kids to make suggestions, help prepare food or set the table. “Pouring milk into a measuring cup, discussing why cheese melts on a casserole, tasting different yogurt textures, or explaining that milk is a local food can help build skills and knowledge. Plus, they’re great ways to get kids excited about dairy,” notes McGraw. Last, but not least, turn off all devices including TV, tablets and phones, and enjoy time as a family. It’s worth a try, as sharing more meals together could mean large rewards for the family.

For additional information on dairy’s place in family meals, visit www.stldairycouncil.org, call St. Louis District Dairy Council at (314)-835-9668, or e-mail emcgraw@stldairycouncil.org. For additional easy and tasty recipes, check us out on Facebook at [STLDairyCouncil](https://www.facebook.com/STLDairyCouncil).

Recipes

Cheesy Chicken Casserole

PREP TIME 30 minutes

COOK TIME 30 minutes

TOTAL TIME 1 hour

SERVINGS 6 servings

Ingredients

3 cups shell noodles uncooked

3 tablespoons butter

1/3 cup red bell pepper diced

1 onion finely diced

1/2 teaspoon seasoning salt

1 teaspoon chili powder

10 3/4 oz cream of chicken soup condensed

1 1/3 cups milk

3 cups shredded sharp Cheddar cheese divided

1/3 cup shredded parmesan cheese

4 oz mild green chiles

3 cups cooked chicken

Instructions

Heat oven to 375°F.

Cook shells al dente according to package directions.

Cook onion and red bell pepper in butter until tender, about 5 minutes. Stir in salt and chili powder.

In a large bowl combine soup, onion mixture, milk and 2 cups cheddar cheese and parmesan cheese. Mix well. Stir in chicken, pasta and green chiles.

Spread into a 9x13 casserole dish. Top with remaining cheese.

Bake 30-35 minutes or until hot and bubbly.

NUTRITION INFORMATION Calories: 649, Fat: 39g, Carbohydrates: 32g, Protein: 40g, Vitamin A: 28.4%, Calcium: 57.3%,

Mediterranean Greek Yogurt Sauce

PREP TIME 15 minutes

COOK TIME 5 minutes

TOTAL TIME 20 minutes

SERVINGS 8 servings

Ingredients

1 garlic clove, minced

1 cup chopped fresh dill, stems removed

1 1/4 cup Greek yogurt

3/4 cup Feta cheese

1 tbsp olive oil

Juice of 1/2 lemon or lime

Pinch cayenne pepper, optional

Salt, if needed

Instructions

Combine the minced garlic, fresh dill, yogurt, olive oil, lemon juice and cayenne pepper in a food processor.

Run the food processor until all the ingredients are well blended and a smooth thick sauce or dip develops.

Test and add salt if needed. Transfer to a small bowl or container, cover and refrigerate

NUTRITION INFORMATION Calories: 258, Total Fat 10.1g , Total Carbohydrate 14.6 g, Protein 28.5g, Calcium 430mg (33% DV)

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