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Regular family meals result in better eating habits for adolescents

Philadelphia, PA, March 9, 2009 – Good eating habits can result when families eat together. In the March/April 2009 issue of the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, researchers from the School of Public Health, University of Minnesota report on one of the first studies to examine the long-term benefits of regular family meals for diet quality during the transition from early to middle adolescence. In general, the study found adolescents who participated in regular family meals reported more healthful diets and meal patterns compared to adolescents without regular family meals.

Data were drawn from Project EAT, a population-based, longitudinal study designed to examine socioenvironmental, personal, and behavioral determinants of dietary intake and weight status among an ethnically diverse sample of adolescents. Young adolescents completed classroom surveys and a questionnaire in 1998 and 1999 when they were about 12 to 13 years old (referred to as Time 1), and then completed a further round as middle adolescents five years later (Time 2). The study sample included 303 male and 374 female adolescents.

Regular family meals, defined as five or more meals together per week, declined over time. Sixty percent of youth had regular family meals during early adolescence compared to 30% during middle adolescence. Having regular family meals at both Time 1 and Time 2 was associated with greater frequency of consuming breakfast and dinner meals and increased intakes of vegetables, calcium-rich food, dietary fiber, and several nutrients including calcium, magnesium, potassium, iron, and zinc five years later. An important finding is that although adolescents with regular family meals at both Time 1 and Time 2 had better diet quality, on average, overall dietary adequacy was not achieved for the entire study sample. These findings are consistent with current national consumption data that identified dietary intake of fruits, vegetables, whole-grains, potassium, magnesium, vitamin E, and dietary fiber as problematic for this age group.

Researcher Teri L. Burgess-Champoux, PhD, RD, LD, states, "These findings suggest that having regular family meals during the transition from early to middle adolescence positively impacts the development of healthful eating behaviors for youth. Findings from the current analysis, in conjunction with similar findings from a longitudinal analysis of older adolescents transitioning to young adulthood, strongly suggest that regular family meals have long-term nutritional benefits...The importance of incorporating shared mealtime experiences on a consistent basis during this key developmental period should be emphasized to parents, health care providers, and educators."

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The article is "Are Family Meal Patterns Associated with Overall Diet Quality during the Transition from Early to Middle Adolescence?" by Teri L. Burgess-Champoux, PhD, RD, LD; Nicole Larson, PhD, MPH, RD; Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, PhD, MPH, RD; Peter J. Hannan, MStat; and Mary Story, PhD, RD. It appears in the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, Volume 41, Issue 2 (March/April 2009) published by Elsevier.
