

Mastering Meals Step-by-step

To take care of yourself and others with food, you must have meals. To have meals and to *keep* having them, your meals must be filling and good-tasting. You need to get enough to eat of food you enjoy. To have meals, start where you are. Which item below best describes what you can surely do with meals? Once you get used to doing what you do with meals, move on to the next step. If you want to. You don't *have* to.



1. **Don't have meals? Don't want them?** That is up to you. Keep in mind we aren't talking about cooking from scratch, having "fresh" food, or eating food you are "supposed to" but don't enjoy. We are talking about *structure*. A meal is when you sit down and eat, by yourself or with others.
2. **Get the meal habit.**² Eat what you are eating now, just have it at regular meal- and snack-times. Make meals your idea, at more or less set times. Don't just have meals when your or somebody's else's hunger strikes. Make meals you enjoy, with food that fills you up. That will let you forget about food until the next time to eat.

Use snacks to support mealtime. Children and grown-ups need to come to meals hungry and ready to eat, but not so hungry they can't wait. Have snacks at set times about halfway between meals. Don't let family members have food or drinks between times—except for water.

3. **Do a little planning.**³ Start by knowing in the morning what to have for dinner. Then figure out meals for a day or a few days ahead. When you have a new food, also have food that you know and enjoy. Eat—or not. Even if you choose it and cook it, you might not want to eat it—this time.

4. **Add on, don't take away.**⁴ Once you have the meal habit, you may get tired of the same foods all the time. Add on to what you are eating now. Go slowly, and make only one change at a time. To calm down family members who get upset by anything new, point out that their favorites are still there. Tell them they don't have to eat anything they don't want to. Maintain a division of responsibility. You do the *what, when* and *where of feeding*, they do the *how much* and *whether of eating*.

Make wise use of "forbidden" food. Include chips or fries at mealtime as often as you want them, and eat as much as you want. For children, limit dessert to one serving so it doesn't compete with the meal. Regularly include sweets at snack time, and let your child eat as many cookies as she wants. Do the same yourself.

5. **Don't get caught in the food rules.**⁵ Having meals can make you think about good-food, bad-food rules. Don't do it! Those rules get in the way of having meals and can make them a chore and a bore. To keep up the work of having meals, you need to enjoy planning, cooking and eating them.

For more about eating, feeding, and family meals, see Ellyn Satter's *Secrets of Feeding a Healthy Family*.



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