



*The SIA Staff  
wishes you and  
your family health,  
laughter and peace  
this holiday season.*



## The magical power of family meals

By Lyn Poll, M.S., SIA Prevention Services

What if someone told you that there's a "magic bullet" to improve the quality of your daily life, your children's chances of success in the world, and your family's health and well-being. Even better, what if it were inexpensive, easy to produce and within everyone's reach. Would you pull the trigger?



Decades of research have shown that regular family meals can offer physical, social, emotional and academic benefits. While some of these benefits can be gained through

other activities, eating together is the only single activity that provides all of them at the same time. Although work schedules, sports, after-school activities and everything else we must manage can create challenges in getting everyone together to

share meals, the rewards may be worth the extra effort. Keep reading to learn what research says about the benefits of family meals and some useful tips for making family meals a routine.

### The Benefits

- **Healthier food, improved nutrition.** A study in the Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior (JNEB) found that families who shared meals together ate more fruit, vegetables, fiber, calcium and vitamin-rich foods. They also consumed fewer sugar-sweetened beverages during those meals. The study also noted that adolescents who shared three or more meals per week with family had a lower body mass index (BMI) and less body fat mass. By modeling healthy eating behaviors at the table, parents can influence food choices, help improve overall nutrition, create more adventurous eaters and lower the risk of childhood obesity.

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- The magical power of sharing family meals

## Family meals

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- **Better emotional and mental health.** Sharing a family meal can increase resilience, boost self-esteem, and lower the risk of depression and anxiety. A 2017 study in the JNEB found that teens who had shared meals five or more times a week had fewer symptoms of depression and other psychological difficulties, and better emotional well-being.
- **Strengthened family bonds.** Family meals provide time for the whole family to be together, which can deepen relationships, keep everyone connected and improve communication. Sitting down together is an opportunity to spend time with loved ones, share the day and make plans. But that's not all. Beyond the small talk, family meals teach social skills, table manners, and how to listen and respect others. Eating together can help us survive and thrive during life's ups and downs.
- **Fewer risky behaviors.** Research has shown that sharing family meals can help keep kids on the "straight and narrow." According to the Food Industry Association, adolescents who share meals three or more times per week are less likely to abuse prescription or illegal drugs, drink alcohol, smoke or use marijuana, and engage in sexual activity.
- **Better academic performance.** Gathering around the table more than four times a week has been associated with better test scores, greater success in school, an increased level of vocabulary and greater language skills development.

These are just a few of the rewards that come from eating shared meals. Here are some simple tips to help inspire a few "mini" family reunions each week:

- **Start small.** Choose a few meals each week – breakfast, lunch, dinner, even snack time counts. Weekends or weekdays, the specific mealtime isn't important. What is important is spending quality time together.
- **Keep it simple.** Meals don't have to be elaborate (sandwiches, eggs, pancakes, hamburgers, tacos, etc...) Use simple ingredients and keep the basics on hand, such as salad greens, rice, pasta, cheese, chicken, beef, tofu, broth, frozen vegetables, and so on, so meals can be prepared quickly with recipes the family enjoys. Get the kids involved with meal ideas/planning, cooking and cleaning up. All ages can help, and when they feel like members of the team, they're more likely to value the time shared and eat what's prepared.
- **Put it on the schedule.** Getting intentional about family meals can help with following through. Look at the schedule with the family then plan times for sharing meals. When everyone commits to something, it's more likely to happen.
- **Make it fun.** Have an indoor picnic, choose a theme (taco Tuesday, meatless Monday, breakfast for dinner, etc.), eat on the patio, have dress-up dinner night, make mini pizzas. Get creative and make things festive, even if it feels like an added chore. It'll create new memories and promote family bonding.
- **Insist on a screen-free zone.** Silence the phones and put them out of reach, shut off the TV and refrain from using any other digital devices during mealtimes. Agree that this time is for listening and sharing. Studies show that people consume more unhealthy foods while eating in front of the TV and when using electronics during meals, all of which can lead to becoming overweight.

Are you ready to pull the trigger and experience the almost magical powers that sharing family meals can generate? The rewards, such as strengthened family bonds and improved physical, social and emotional well-being, are priceless. A pledge to have three or more shared meals together at home per week can reap ongoing benefits. For more inspiration and support, join the [Family Meals Movement](#).

Resources: Family Meal Frequency, Diet, and Family Functioning: A Systematic Review with Meta-analyses - Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior ([jneb.org](#))





Try 'exercise snacks' •  
for easy, bite-size workouts



wellness  
& safety



## 'Exercise snacks' are alternatives to traditional workouts

By Deborah Camacho, M.S., SIA Prevention Services

A new trend in the fitness industry is called an "exercise snack". No, it isn't the protein drink you reach for after your workout. Exercise snacks are simply short, easy bouts of active movement that offer the benefits of longer, more sustained workouts.

Many people around the world don't spend time exercising, yet their overall fitness levels are very good. How is this possible? In many of the world's Blue Zones (areas around the globe with the highest concentration of centenarians), people just move a lot more than the average person in America. The key is to move every 20 minutes or so. This is an easy way to integrate movement into daily life without the constraints of structured daily workouts.

There are many opportunities in our daily lives for us to move. Walking to and from places is often underrated, but parking farther away from the grocery store in order to get more exercise is just one example. We don't live in the hills of Sardinia, Italy, of course, but stairs are always good substitutes. Good old-fashioned housecleaning, especially when it involves mopping, scrubbing and vacuuming, offers multiple health benefits, as do activities like hand washing the car, mixing food without a blender, digging and weeding in the garden, and long brisk walks with the family pooch. Everything counts.

During the first part of the pandemic, popular fitness apps showed that most people decreased their average walking by as much as 50 percent, and three years later many have yet to improve this statistic. Today people are just moving less. We already know the benefits of sustained exercise and research on exercise snacks is piling up. A large study of more than 44,000 adult men and women from four different countries showed a reduced risk of early

death with just 30 to 40 minutes of exercise per day. Even more impressive is that just 11 minutes of activity a day has shown to be beneficial to even the most sedentary.

This study was also significant for



another reason. It was previously thought that cardiovascular improvement required 30 to 60 minutes per day, based on self-reported activity. However, this newer study is more accurate as it utilized a tool that measures actual active and sedentary time.

Recent research also suggests that moving more can change the activity of certain genes, specifically the ones responsible for making the enzymes that help break down fat. Long story short, movement burns calories and can increase metabolism.

Another great benefit: Short exercise snacks before meals can help control blood sugar levels, which is particularly helpful for Type 2 diabetics and those with heart disease and other related diseases. Add in a healthy diet of plant-based foods, fruits, nuts and seeds, and you have a winning combination for better health.

But how is a short burst of movement as good as traditional sustained cardiovascular activity? Dr. Martin Gibala, professor of kinesiology at McMaster University Hamilton and author of "The Eleven-Minute Workout", explains: "There

are proteins in the body that serve as molecular 'fuel gauges' and trigger physiological remodeling in response to the stress of exercise. Brief bouts of vigorous effort can activate these proteins similar to traditional endurance training, and despite a lower time commitment."

The beauty of exercise snacks is that you need no special equipment – your body is the equipment. A complete workout can be done with walking, running in place, lunging and utilizing other types of calisthenics. The key to benefiting from these activities, says Gibala, is keeping them vigorous. For those who can't quite manage high-intensity workouts, modifications can always be substituted.

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## Exercise snacks

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Chris Jordan, director of exercise physiology at Johnson and Johnson, developed a [7-minute standing workout](#) that's designed for all abilities. You can access this workout through YouTube or through an app called J&J Official 7 Minute Workout. As always, when starting a new physical regime, check with your doctor.

Exercise snacks don't need to be highly structured, either. Speed walking during the day, taking the stairs at the office, or even dancing around for a few minutes can help. Setting a movement alarm can also help remind you to get up and move. Although there's even some evidence that suggests the intermittent approach may be better, the bottom line is that there's no single best method - and any activity counts!



## Examples of 'exercise snacks'

The 11-minute workout practiced by Dr. Gibala and highlighted in this video link [Back to Basics](#).

The workout includes:

- Jumping jacks
- Burpees (but without the push-up)
- Walking in place
- High-knee running in place
- Split squat jumps (beginning and ending in lunge position, alternating legs)

## Prohibited playground equipment

Do you have a plastic playhouse on your playground? Or maybe a small dome climber? Unfortunately, equipment like this isn't permitted on school playgrounds.

All public playgrounds in California are required to meet safety standards outlined by the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) and the ASTM.



As noted in the ASTM standard, "play structures must be anchored to the ground or not be intended to be relocated." When equipment is not anchored, it can tip over and cause injury.

Also, small houses, dome climbers, portable basketball hoops and other similar types of equipment are specifically designed for home use and smaller numbers of children. These play structures typically don't have the strength to stand up to use by large numbers of children.

Many well-meaning families or community members may donate non-sanctioned equipment to your schools. Others with good intentions may purchase equipment from online sources. Such donations must be declined for the play area to remain in compliance.







## Take a break with meditation

Did you know that the [SIA YouTube](#) channel has several videos to help you relax? If you need a moment to unwind and breathe, visit our YouTube site for guided meditations to help you manage life's stresses and move through each day.

## Tips for happy and healthy holidays

**Prep meals in advance during a busy week** and save time and money in the process. Advance prep helps reduce food waste and fosters positive healthy eating habits during the busy holiday season.

**Plan ahead** to avoid standing in line at the supermarket during the holiday rush. Choose recipes that use many of the same ingredients so they can be prepared all at once, saving both time and money.

**Make double batches of family favorites.** Casseroles, soups and stews are easy to freeze, as are extra portions and leftovers for quick meals on busy nights.

Source: personalbest.com

## Holiday safety in the classroom

- Ensure all cloth decorations are flame-resistant.
- Don't use extension cords for small appliances.
- Avoid electrical cords and cables across walkways.
- Don't use candles in classrooms; they're not allowed.
- Keep potentially poisonous plants – mistletoe, holly berries, Jerusalem cherry and amaryllis – away from children.
- Clean up all food to avoid pest infestations.
- Before leaving for the holiday break, ensure that all windows and doors are tightly closed and locked.



## Upcoming free virtual trainings

SIA provides member district staff with virtual trainings on a variety of topics that apply to both personal and professional life. To learn more about any of the trainings listed below, contact [tfranco@sia-jpa.org](mailto:tfranco@sia-jpa.org). You can also join our [email list](#) to learn of future events.

12/7	<a href="#">Responding to Others' Anger</a>	5:30 – 7:30 p.m.
12/8	<a href="#">Coping with Chronic Illness During the Holidays</a>	5:30 – 6:30 p.m.
12/14	<a href="#">Budgeting for the Holidays: Managing Personal Finances</a>	5:30 – 6:30 p.m.
12/15	<a href="#">Stop Taking Things Personally</a>	5:30 – 7:30 p.m.
12/19	<a href="#">Domestic Abuse in the Workplace</a>	5:30 – 7:30 p.m.



## QUOTE TO NOTE

*"That's the real trouble with the world: too many people grow up."*

– Walt Disney