Eating breakfast as a family: Mealtime experiences and linkages to dietary intake among adolescents in rural Minnesota

Nicole Larson, PhD, MPH, RDN; Qi Wang, MS; Robert Leduc, PhD; Jerica M. Berge, PhD, MPH; Marilyn S. Nanney, PhD, MPH, RD

University of Minnesota Division of Epidemiology & Community Health, Clinical & Translational Science Institute, Division of Biostatistics, and Department of Family Medicine & Community Health

BACKGROUND

• Overweight and obesity rates tend to be higher among adolescents living in rural as compared to urban areas and targeted strategies are needed to promote improvements in their weight-related dietary behaviors.

• Numerous studies have linked family meal frequency to better dietary intake and, albeit less consistently, to lower risk for excessive weight gain and obesity. However, most research among adolescents has focused on the evening meal and urban populations.

• As many families experience scheduling barriers that prevent them from eating together at dinner and rural families may experience unique challenges to having regular family meals, it is important to examine whether eating together at breakfast is associated with similar benefits for youth living outside of urban settings.

OBJECTIVES

• Describe the frequency of eating family meals at breakfast and mealtime experiences among a rural, school-based sample of adolescents.

• Examine associations of family breakfast frequency with measures of dietary quality.

METHODS & DESIGN

• The sample consisted of 414 participants (56% female, 33% non-white race, mean age=15.2 years) enrolled in an intervention study designed to promote the school breakfast program in 8 rural Minnesota school districts.

• Participants completed baseline survey measures online and 24-hour dietary recalls by phone in 2013-2014.

• Family breakfast frequency was assessed using the question: “During the past 7 days, how many times did all or most of the people living in your home eat breakfast together?”

• Additionally, adolescents reported on their perceptions of mealtime structure/atmosphere, meal preparation involvement, food restaurant purchasing.

• Dietary quality was assessed by calculating Healthy Eating Index scores among boys or girls. However, having family breakfast meals 3 times per week was related to higher whole grain scores among boys (p-value = 0.002).

RESULTS

• Frequency of eating breakfast together over the past week was as follows: 51% never, 28% 1-2 times, and 21% 3-7 times.

• More than two-thirds of adolescents reported that scheduling was a barrier to eating breakfast with their family.

• Perceptions that eating together is important, breakfast is a time to talk with family members, eating together is enjoyable, and expectations exist for following mealtimes were positively related to family breakfast frequency (see Figure 1).

• Family breakfast frequency was positively related to involvement in preparing breakfast food (p-value <0.001, see Figure 3) but unrelated to the frequency of purchasing breakfast at a fast-food restaurant.

• Family breakfast frequency was unrelated to overall HEI-2010 scores among boys or girls. However, having family breakfast meals 3-7 times per week was related to higher whole grain scores among boys (p-value = 0.002).

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

• The study results indicate that over half of rural families of adolescents never ate breakfast together and scheduling is a common barrier to eating breakfast as a family.

• Opportunities exist for nutrition professionals to promote family breakfast meals by educating families about the importance of eating together, strategies for creating a positive mealtme atmosphere, and healthy food preparation.

Figure 1. Perceptions of Mealtime Structure and Atmosphere at Breakfast among Adolescents in Rural Minnesota, 2013-2014

Figure 2. Past Week Adolescent Involvement in Preparing Food for Breakfast by Frequency of Family Breakfast Meals

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