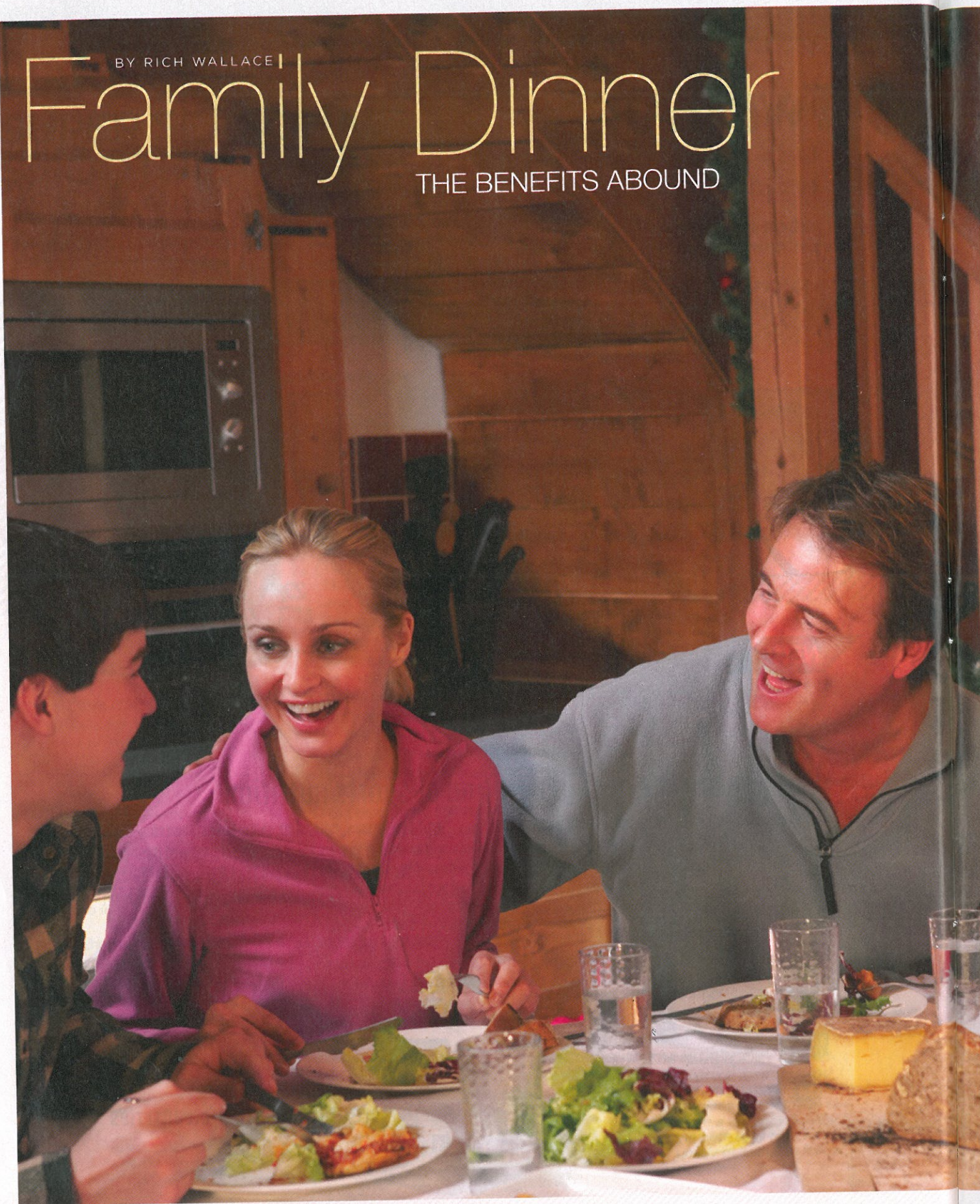


BY RICH WALLACE |

Family Dinner

THE BENEFITS AROUND



When I remarried, my new wife decided that we'd have a homey, candlelight dinner the first night with my two sons. The boys were on the cusp of becoming teenagers and weren't too sure yet about this new arrival from Toronto.

"Don't they have electricity in Canada?" was one reaction at the sight of the candles. They also didn't like that the TV would be off during the meal and that we'd try using cutlery. We wouldn't stand over the sink anymore to eat messy foods. We'd attempt to talk to each other between mouthfuls.

That was quite a few years ago, and our results were mixed. But recent research underscores the fact that family mealtimes are extremely important for kids.

HEALTHY HABITS

Eating meals as a family at least a few times a week usually yields healthier kids. On average, they'll be less likely to be overweight, will have fewer emotional problems, and will achieve better grades in school.

About 40 percent of a typical family's food budget is spent eating out, and that contributes to poor food choices and poor health. A recent study from Rutgers University found that kids who frequently eat family meals at home consume more fruits and vegetables, fiber, calcium-rich foods, and vitamins.

Eating with the family is particularly important for teenagers. Teens who regularly eat family meals have higher self-esteem and are less likely to suffer from eating disorders. The more, the better—but even a few meals a week can make a difference.

"More frequent family dinners related to fewer emotional and behavioral problems, greater emotional well-being, more trusting and helpful behaviors toward others, and higher life satisfaction," said McGill University psychiatry professor Frank Elgar, PhD. He led a study published earlier this year that found benefits—even in kids who don't have an easy rapport with their parents.

EVERY MEAL HELPS

Dr. Elgar's team looked at the connection between the frequency of family dinners and positive and negative aspects of mental health. Using data from more than 26,000 kids ages 11 to 15, they found consistent results regardless of the child's age, gender, or family income. The more time the families spent eating as a group, the better off the kids were. "From having no dinners together to eating together seven nights a week, each additional dinner related to significantly better mental health," Dr. Elgar said.

Barbara Fiese, PhD, a specialist in family studies who has conducted similar research at the University of Illinois, said families who eat together are likely to be more connected. That encourages teenagers to talk about their problems. "If family meals are not a forced activity, if parents don't totally control the conversation, and if teens can contribute to family interaction and feel like they're benefiting from it, older kids are likely to welcome participating," she said. >>>

ADDED PROTECTION

Everyone is pressed for time, of course, and busy schedules often wreak havoc with mealtime. But even an occasional family dinner makes a difference. Kids who eat at least one or two meals a week with their parents tend to eat more fruit and vegetables on a daily basis.

"Shared family meals seem to operate as a protective factor for overweight, unhealthy eating, and disordered eating," Dr. Fiese wrote in an article she coauthored for the journal *Pediatrics*. She found that teenagers themselves think they would eat a healthier diet if they had more meals with their families.

BE FLEXIBLE

"The good, old-fashioned family meal that we've long forgotten about is so critical," said Binghamton University nursing professor Mary Muscari, PhD, who has authored several books on raising kids. But it doesn't have to be dinner. "If you can't do it at night because the kids are overscheduled, do it at breakfast. Have some time when people can sit down and share and connect."

The quality of the experience trumps the frequency of the meals. It's better to have a few relaxed meals together—with no distractions like a blaring TV or a video game—than to sit together and stare at hand-held devices. Face-to-face time around a table encourages conversation, which should not focus on tense topics such as grades or misbehavior. Kids will want to avoid family meals if the time turns into an interrogation.

So forget the candlelight and don't force the conversation, but do try your best to squeeze in more family meals with the kids. As Dr. Muscari says, "All the toys in the world will never make up for parental time." ■■■

SELECTED SOURCES "Family Dinners Nourish Good Mental Health in Adolescents," McGill University, 3/20/13 ■ "Family Meals Remain Important Through Teen Years, Expert Says," University of Illinois, 7/12/11 ■ "Is Frequency of Shared Family Meals Related to the Nutritional Health of Children and Adolescents?" by A.J. Hammons and B.H. Fiese, *Pediatrics*, 6/1/11 ■ "Mealtime Matters," Brigham Young University, www.foreverfamilies.byu.edu ■ "Occasional Family Meals Enough to Boost Kids' Fruit and Veg Intake," University of Leeds, 12/19/12 ■ "Raising Teens: How Parents Can Bridge Societal Challenges," Binghamton University, 2/6/08 ■ "Researchers Find Additional Evidence that Families that Eat Together May Be the Healthiest," Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology, 4/23/12