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Family Meals Offer Nourishment and Much More!!

Family mealtimes have declined by about one-third over the last few decades

“Did the mother feed them?” I asked my husband.

“I haven’t seen her come by lately,” he replied.

I looked out the window to catch a glimpse of our little backyard zoo. A mother rabbit had created a nest in my planter surrounded by my flowering purple impatiens.

We were trying to protect the baby rabbits from our two dachshunds and the three retrievers who live next door. We covered the planter and built a brick wall inside it to keep the rabbits inside as they grew. We even built a makeshift awning with two sawhorses and a cover held in place with bricks. I’m sure our neighbors think we are strange. I guess

we are.

Granted, I don’t enjoy adult rabbits eating my flowers and vegetables.

“Where are the rest of the rabbits?” my husband asked one day.

I didn’t take the time to answer. I ran outside. Three had escaped, so I tried to put the remaining two in a box to bring to a wooded area. One leaped out of my gloved hands. The other one escaped from the box. I won’t be a zookeeper anytime soon.

I could almost hear the “Mission: Impossible” theme playing as we scoured the bushes looking for the fugitives. They had hoisted themselves over the brick wall in the planter.

The bunnies are on their own —



Children and teens who eat more often with their families tend to have better grades and vocabulary skills. (Pexels photo)

just like our human kids who have left our nest. Parents of any species instinctively care for their young, and then eventually the “kids” grow up and take care of themselves.

I thought about the mother bunny returning a couple of times a day to feed them. We humans do more than offer nourishment during feeding times. Mealtimes offer more than food.

As summer has arrived and school is out, gathering children and teens of all ages around the dinner table has distinct advantages. Unfortunately, researchers have shown that family mealtimes have declined by about one-third over the last few decades.

Yes, people are busy with activities, work schedules and friend commitments. Food preparation takes time, requires shopping for ingredients and includes clean-up.

The benefits of gathering family and friends around a meal at any time of the day far outweigh the costs. Researchers have been studying the advantages of family meals since the 1940s. From a nutrition perspective,

children tend to eat healthier meals when eating with their family. The meals are higher in fiber, rich in fruits and vegetables and feature fewer fried foods and sodas. As a result, more family meals are linked with fewer issues, including overweight and obesity.

Meals provide structure, and the children can feel safer and more secure. Children and teens who eat more often with their families tend to have better grades and vocabulary skills.

Social skills and relationships improve during family meals, especially if phones, TVs and other distractions are put aside. Many problems can be worked out in conversations around the family table. Family meals may enhance mental health for both the adults and the children.

Kids can help prepare meals. We have many resources to assist with family meals through North Dakota State University Extension: a free monthly Family Table newsletter, conversation starter cards and a variety of meal planning and preparation materials. See ndsu.edu/FamilyMeals-26 to access these items.

We all need healthy meals regardless of our living situation. Kids of all ages can learn valuable skills by helping with meal preparation. Simple meals made in a slow cooker or on a sheet pan can save time and fit a family budget. More importantly, they can bring

people together around the table.

One-pan Chicken Fajitas

- 1 ½ pounds chicken breasts, cut into ½-inch strips
- 2 red bell peppers, sliced into strips
- 1 green bell pepper, sliced into strips
- 1 onion, sliced
- 3 tablespoons olive or canola oil
- 1 packet reduced-sodium taco seasoning
- 1 lime
- 10 whole-wheat tortillas
- Optional toppings: shredded cheese, salsa, sour cream, avocado slices

Preheat oven to 425 degrees. Sprinkle taco seasoning and drizzle olive oil into bowl with chicken, bell peppers and onion. Toss to coat. Spread contents on greased pan sheet; bake 20 to 25 minutes or until chicken is fully cooked. Squeeze lime juice over pan and serve with whole-wheat tortillas.

Makes 10 servings (one fajita per serving). Without added toppings, each fajita has 280 calories, 9 grams (g) fat, 20 g protein, 27 g carbohydrate, 3 g fiber and 380 milligrams sodium.

(Julie Garden-Robinson, Ph.D., R.D., L.R.D., is a North Dakota State University Extension food and nutrition specialist and professor in the Department of Health, Nutrition and Exercise Sciences.)

Dakota Gardener

“Average” and “normal” do not mean the same thing.

By Joe Zeleznik, Forester
NDSU Extension

My friend Karen teaches college-prep math at our local high school. As a gift for her graduates this year, she bought them water bottles with printing that read, “English is important. Math is important.”

I laughed my head off. Of course, she’s just poking a little fun at her colleagues in the language arts, while emphasizing her own field of expertise. But the wording raises a challenge I face every day: how do we communi-

cate what’s “normal” in nature?

The meteorologists discuss this all the time. “Normal” and “average” are two very different things. Usually, only a deep discussion of statistics actually clears this up for me. As I understand it, “normal” includes all the variability we see every year. It includes the extremes, whether they’re high or low, even when those extremes don’t occur very often.

Here’s an example. I once was asked, “Is it true that trees produce one single growth ring each year?” I replied that, in this part of the world, yes, it’s mostly true.

Did you catch how much I waffled?

“In this part of the world.” In temperate climates, not tropical climates, trees generally do put on one growth ring per year. During extremely dry years, conifers

What is ‘normal’? Communicating the variability found in nature

might not add a ring at the bottom of the tree. But that ring might be fully formed at the top of the tree.

The waffling: “might.” The qualifier: “top, but not bottom.”

Is a missing ring on conifers “normal”? During an extremely dry year, yes, it is. Is a missing ring on conifers “average”? Not at all. It’s not common.

Let’s look at another example. Late last summer, lilacs were blooming across the state. It was weird, and a lot of people were worried. Would their shrubs survive the winter? Was this part of a long-term decline? Was there a new disease or insect pest of lilacs?

Nobody asked, “Is this normal?”

And I understand that. Lilacs don’t usually bloom in fall! They bloom in the spring and early

summer. Even “late lilac,” also called Villosa lilac, should be done blooming by the end of June.

In 2025, across much of the state, late spring and early summer were pretty wet. Conditions were perfect for fungal diseases of tree and shrub leaves. Lilacs throughout the region lost much of their foliage, and the shrubs went into a type of dormancy early.

The lilacs set their flower buds, but once growth conditions improved in the fall, with cooler temperatures, the lilacs blossomed. And while the timing of flowering was uncommon, the whole process was normal.

The same situation occurred with lilacs in 2024 in eastern North Dakota. Wet conditions caused leaf damage, which shut



A common lilac showing off its 2026 blossoms — the same plant that blossomed in fall 2025 after being heavily infected with fungus *Pseudocercospora* (NDSU photo)

down plant growth. Flower buds set but opened up in the fall.

Normal? Yes. The disease that causes this issue is called *Pseudocercospora*, and it’s widespread. It does infect some lilac leaves every year. Usually, though, it’s not to the point that the trees go dormant.

So, was this situation “normal”? Yes. Was it average? Absolutely not.

Nature is pretty variable. From one location to another, from one year to the next, weather conditions are different. And how they affect plants, and the pests that harm them, can be incredibly variable.

And communicating that variability is pretty challenging. I wonder if the meteorologists will tell me I got it wrong.



Mosquito bite prevention remains best defense against West Nile virus

Bismarck, ND (June 8, 2026) - North Dakota Health and Human Services (HHS) reminds people that preventing mosquito bites is the most effective way to avoid West Nile virus. Although no human cases of West Nile virus have been reported to HHS so far this year, there is a risk of contracting the disease anytime mosquitoes are active.

“People get West Nile virus from the bite of an infected mosquito,” said Amanda Bakken, West Nile surveillance coordinator. “There is no human vaccine for West Nile virus, and there are no specific treatments for the disease, so it is important to protect yourself and your family from mosquito bites.”

HHS recommends residents take the following precautions to avoid mosquito bites:

- Use insect repellents registered with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) that contain ingredients such as DEET, picaridin, IR3535, oil of lemon eucalyptus (OLE), para-methane-diol (PMD), 2-undecanone or permethrin (for clothing only). Always follow the directions on

the manufacturer’s label for safe and effective use.

- Wear protective clothing outdoors, including long-sleeved shirts, long pants and socks.
- Limit outdoor activities between dusk and dawn when mosquitoes that can carry the virus are most likely to bite.
- Eliminate standing water in containers around homes where mosquitoes can lay their eggs, such as gutters, buckets, flower pots, old tires, wading pools and birdbaths.
- Install or repair screens on windows and doors to keep mosquitoes out of your home.
- Maintain a well-trimmed yard and landscape around your home.

Most people infected with West Nile virus experience no symptoms. Those who develop symptoms commonly report fever, headache, body aches, joint pain or rash. People who develop severe illness may experience a stiff neck, altered mental status, paralysis, coma or death. People age 60 and older and those with underlying health conditions are at greater risk of developing West Nile neuroinvasive disease.

In 2025, 86 North Dakota res-

idents in 23 counties were diagnosed with the disease. Of those, 36 were hospitalized and two died.

For more information about West Nile virus and mosquito bite prevention, visit hhs.nd.gov/wnv.

ADVERTISEMENT FOR BIDS

The Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians are requesting sealed bids for Sealing Cracks in Parking Lot at the Turtle Mountain Elementary School that includes the following:

- Seal cracks throughout approximately 8,200 SY of existing parking lot. Work includes surface cleaning/prep, routing or cleaning cracks as needed, application of approved crack sealant, removal of excess material, and protection of sealed areas until cured. All work to meet project specifications and applicable codes.

Please Contact Curtis Keplin (curtis.keplin@bie.edu) or Tyson Jeannotte (tjeannotte@houstoneng.com) to coordinate Pre-Bid Walkthrough and to learn the specification regarding this project. Bidder is required to include a 3% TERO Fee and 1% EPA Fee to bids \$10,000 or more.

Must specify 3% TERO Fee
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All bids should be accompanied by proof of liability insurance and a bid bond of 20%

All sealed bids should be addressed and mailed to
Turtle Mountain Property Department
Attn: Alan Malatterre
4180 Highway 281
PO Box 900
Belcourt, ND 58316

No faxed or email bid proposals will be accepted. All Tribal and TERO Regulations will be applicable and must be concurred with.

The Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians reserves the right to accept or reject any or all bid proposals and readvertise when it is in the best interest of the tribe.

All bid proposals must be received no later than 1:00 p.m. (CST) June 29th, 2026

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