Family structure and risk behaviors: the role of the family meal in assessing likelihood of adolescent risk behaviors.

BACKGROUND: Previous literature has asserted that family meals are a key protective factor for certain adolescent risk behaviors. It is suggested that the frequency of eating with the family is associated with better psychological well-being and a lower risk of substance use and delinquency. However, it is unclear whether there is evidence of causal links between family meals and adolescent health-risk behaviors.

PURPOSE: The purpose of this article is to review the empirical literature on family meals and adolescent health behaviors and outcomes in the US.

DATA SOURCES: A SEARCH WAS CONDUCTED IN FOUR ACADEMIC DATABASES: Social Sciences Full Text, Sociological Abstracts, PsycINFO®, and PubMed/MEDLINE.

STUDY SELECTION: We included studies that quantitatively estimated the relationship between family meals and health-risk behaviors.

DATA EXTRACTION: Data were extracted on study sample, study design, family meal measurement, outcomes, empirical methods, findings, and major issues.

DATA SYNTHESIS: Fourteen studies met the inclusion criteria for the review that measured the relationship between frequent family meals and various risk-behavior outcomes. The outcomes considered by most studies were alcohol use (n=10), tobacco use (n=9), and marijuana use (n=6). Other outcomes included sexual activity (n=2); depression, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts (n=4); violence and delinquency (n=4); school-related issues (n=2); and well-being (n=5). The associations between family meals and the outcomes of
interest were most likely to be statistically significant in unadjusted models or models controlling for basic family characteristics. Associations were less likely to be statistically significant when other measures of family connectedness were included. Relatively few analyses used sophisticated empirical techniques available to control for confounders in secondary data.

CONCLUSION: More research is required to establish whether or not the relationship between family dinners and risky adolescent behaviors is an artifact of underlying confounders. We recommend that researchers make more frequent use of sophisticated methods to reduce the problem of confounders in secondary data, and that the scope of adolescent problem behaviors also be further widened.

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