Telecommuting may be good for your diet.

In a new comprehensive review on the science of telecommuting, psychological scientists Tammy Allen, Timothy Golden, and Kristen Shockley describe both the benefits and drawbacks of working from home. Their in-depth look at current research on telecommuting revealed an unexpected perk: Telecommuting may help families avoid fast food.

“Working from home may be associated with more healthful dietary choices,” they write in Psychological Science in the Public Interest. “At least one study has found that individuals who reported having greater flexibility in terms of their work location also reported eating less fast food for dinner.”

In a 2008 study, Allen and Shockley specifically looked at the relationship between workplace flexibility and family dining habits. Their findings suggest that families actually want to eat together, but working parents struggle with finding enough time and energy for cooking from scratch. Cutting out the daily commute can make more time available for quality time together at the dinner table.

“In interviews with working mothers, time scarcity was identified as a factor contributing to the decline
in family dinners and to an increase in fast food consumption,” they write in the Journal of Vocational Behavior.

More frequent family dinners are associated with reduced rates of smoking, drinking, drug use, and aggressive behavior in children and teens. And at-home dinners tend to include healthier food, with more fruits and vegetables compared to fast food.

For their study, the researchers recruited 220 working parents who had at least one child living at home. Parents reported how many nights their family ate dinner together in a typical week. They also reported how often their children ate fast food or takeout for dinner each week.

To find out whether workplace policies might have an impact on dinner behavior, participants rated the amount of flexibility their work allowed (for example, I have the freedom to work wherever is best for me—either at home or at work). Participants were also asked how supportive their managers were when they had personal or family business to take care of.

A final measure assessed how much stress and exhaustion employees felt due to conflict between their work and family lives. To rule out alternative explanations, the research team controlled for additional variables such as education, annual household income, age, gender, and the number of children living at home.

As predicted, the results suggested that supportive managers and workplace telecommute policies may influence what a family eats for dinner.

Beyond just working long hours, having more flexible work options like telecommuting was associated with how often children ate fast food for dinner. Employees who were able to telecommute or work flexible hours were less likely to serve fast food than those who had more rigid work schedules.

“Time scarcity may be the contributing factor when it comes to choosing fast food,” Allen and colleagues explain. “Lack of a commute not only increases the time available to engage in home-meal preparation, but it may also reduce the temptation to stop at a fast food restaurant.”

“The potential cost savings to organizations are enormous given that healthy parents and healthy children should translate into less absence and lower health insurance costs,” the authors suggest.

Though further study is needed before any causal conclusions can be drawn, the results suggest that company policies on telecommuting may have an unforeseen impact on the health of employees and their children.

References