

Minding your manners in America

There are exceptions, but these eating guidelines are followed at family dinners in most places in America. (These 'rules' are more relaxed in casual situations, such as at fast-food restaurants or on picnics.)

- u When invited to an American's home for dinner, it's polite for guests to ask, "What (food) can I bring?" The host may suggest something or say that it's not necessary to bring anything.
- u Many Americans pray before eating; some, even in restaurants. Christians bow their heads and keep their hands in their lap or clasp them above the table as one person says the prayer. It ends when the person, or everyone together, says, "Amen."
- u Generally, Americans don't have any greeting or wish to tell each other at the beginning of the meal; however, in some restaurants the servers may say "Enjoy your meal."
- u At the very beginning of the meal, each person puts his napkin in his lap. In formal situations, some people use only one hand to eat (except for cutting meat) and leave the other hand in their lap during the meal.
- u At formal dinners, the host takes the lead – others watch him to see how to eat difficult or unknown food. However, the guest of honor, followed by women, will be served first. (At informal dinners the guest serves himself first and then the dish is passed to everyone around the table.)
- u In some families, when second servings are offered it's acceptable to

decline; in other families it's impolite to not take at least a small amount. Generally, it is impolite to take any additional servings after that (although this varies with each family).

- u At the end of the meal, it's polite to offer to help wash the dishes. The host may either happily accept, or say that it's not necessary.



Many Americans pray before eating.

These activities are generally not acceptable at an American dinner table:

- u Making any sounds with the mouth or lips while eating and drinking; burping or belching; speaking with any food in the mouth.
- u Putting the napkin anywhere else but in the lap.
- u Putting anything that will leave a mark or stain on the table instead of the plate.
- u Leaning on the table with elbows or forearms; gesturing with silverware.
- u Reaching for food anywhere beyond the general area of the dinner plate. "Please pass the (name of dish)" is the accepted way to ask for a particular food.

¹ <http://www.foodfunandfacts.com/>

² <http://www.reapinc.org/>

³ <http://www.ams.usda.gov/>