

Breakfast

Breakfast is considered an important meal because it breaks the overnight fasting period, replenishes your supply of glucose and provides other essential nutrients to keep your energy levels up throughout the day.

Glucose

Glucose is the body's energy source. It is broken down and absorbed from the carbohydrates you eat. In the morning, after you have gone without food for as long as 12 hours, your glycogen stores are low. Glycogen is the glucose that has been stored in your muscle tissue and liver where it is released slowly overnight to keep your blood sugar levels stable.

Once all of the energy from the glycogen stores is used up, your body starts to break down fatty acids to produce the energy it needs. Without carbohydrate, fatty acids are only partially oxidised, which can cause reduced energy levels. Eating breakfast restores your glycogen stores and boosts your energy levels, as well as your metabolism for the day.

Essential vitamins, minerals and nutrients

Breakfast provides a significant proportion of the day's total nutrient intake and offers the opportunity to eat foods fortified with nutrients such as folate, iron, B vitamins and fibre. Essential vitamins, minerals and other nutrients can only be gained from food. So, even though your body can usually find enough energy to make it to the next meal, you still need to top up your vitamin and mineral levels to maintain health and vitality.

Skipping breakfast

Extensive research in Australia and overseas has found:

- Many children who skip breakfast are significantly heavier than those who eat breakfast.
- Skipping breakfast may diminish mental performance. Eating breakfast may aid learning, as you are better able to pay attention and are more interested in learning.
- Eating high-fibre breakfast cereals reduces fatigue.
- Children who eat an inadequate breakfast are more likely to make poor food choices for the rest of the day and in the long term.
- People who eat breakfast have more nutritious diets than people who skip breakfast. They also have better eating habits as they are less likely to be hungry for snacks during the day.

Going without breakfast becomes more common with advancing age – approximately 15 per cent of teenagers and one third of adults don't eat breakfast.

Why we skip breakfast

Some common reasons for skipping breakfast include:

- Not enough time
- Too tired to bother
- Wanting to spend the extra time dozing in bed
- No readily available breakfast foods in the house.

A healthy breakfast may reduce the risk of illness

Compared to children who regularly eat breakfast, those who skip breakfast tend to consume fewer kilojoules overall, yet they experience the same rates of overweight and obesity.

There are a number of theories for this. There is some evidence that large meals are more likely to lead to weight gain than smaller, more frequent meals. This is because excess kilojoules eaten during one sitting are stored as body fat, once the glycogen storage areas are full. People who skip breakfast are usually ravenous by lunchtime and tend to eat more to compensate.

Snacking

People who skip breakfast tend to nibble on snacks during the mid-morning or afternoon. This can be a problem if those snacks are low in fibre, vitamins and minerals, but high in fat and salt. Without the extra energy that breakfast can offer, some breakfast skippers feel lethargic and turn to high-energy food and drinks to get them through the day.

If you do skip breakfast, try a nutritious snack such as fresh fruit, yoghurt, a low-fat muffin or a wholemeal sandwich to help you through that mid-morning hunger.

Cultural differences

Breakfast is not considered a staple meal in all parts of the world. People in some cultures consume only two meals each day instead of three, and breakfast isn't traditionally always one of them. Other cultures may consume a different style of breakfast in the morning such as warmed leftovers or egg dishes with breads, rice or noodles. These types of breakfasts also provide a good nutritious start to the day.

Research is ongoing, but there doesn't seem to be any harm in skipping breakfast if that has always been your preference. However, the nutritional content of your lunch and dinner must be sufficient to make up for the loss of breakfast.

Breakfast foods

Research has shown that schoolchildren are more likely to eat breakfast if easy-to-prepare breakfast foods are readily available at home. Some quick suggestions include:

- Whole-wheat or wholegrain breakfast cereals such as wheat biscuits, muesli or bran cereals
- Porridge – such as quick oats
- Fresh fruits
- Wholemeal or multigrain bread to toast
- Muffins or crumpets
- Toast toppings, such as baked beans, eggs, cheese or spreads
- Fruit or plain yoghurts
- Fresh fruit juices
- Low-fat milk.

Mid-morning snack time

Some people find that the thought of food first thing in the morning turns their stomach. If this is the case, switch your breakfast to morning tea or mid-morning snack time instead.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- An Accredited Practising Dietitian, contact the Dietitians Association of Australia

Things to remember

- A healthy breakfast has many health benefits.
- Children who skip breakfast may lack sufficient fibre, vitamins and minerals including iron, calcium, zinc and vitamin B2.

- Reasons for skipping breakfast include lack of time, lack of motivation and lack of available breakfast foods.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

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