

Regular breakfast: A healthy habit in childhood and beyond

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Breakfast provides the energy and nutrients for a proper start to the day. Eating breakfast regularly is linked to improved nutrient intakes and may help maintain a healthy body weight. It is particularly important for children and adolescents, as breakfast appears to support learning and school performance, especially among children with poor nutritional status. As this is the meal most likely to be skipped, Europeans need to wake up to the benefits of breakfast.

Breaking the fast

Most children and young people go from being asleep, where the body has fasted for many hours, to being highly active. The demand for glucose in the muscles and brain shoots up and fuel is required. Breakfast breaks the overnight fast and provides energy to kick-start the body and sharpen the mind.^{1,2} Yet between 10-30% of European children skip breakfast, with older adolescents and girls most likely to do so.^{3,4}

A nutritious meal

Compared to breakfast skippers, children who eat breakfast are more likely to meet nutrient recommendations and have higher daily intakes of important vitamins, minerals and fibre.¹ A quick look at common breakfast choices among children and it is not hard to see why: dairy products, ready-to-eat cereal and breads, juices, fruits and eggs are found among the top.⁴ In addition to the nutritional edge, breakfast eaters exhibit many positive health behaviours, including increased daily fruit and vegetable intake, and more physical activity.⁵

Breakfast eaters slimmer

There is now clear evidence that children who eat breakfast tend to be slimmer. A recent systematic review of sixteen studies examining the effect of breakfast skipping on weight control in over 59,000 European children and adolescents, found that eating breakfast was associated with lower Body Mass Index (a measure of weight relative to height) and appeared to protect against overweight and obesity.⁶ Similar findings have been reported in other reviews.¹ However, as with all observational studies, cause and effect cannot be assumed.

Performance

Early laboratory studies reported positive effects of breakfast on performance indicators including memory recall, attention span, and creativity.² A recent systematic review considered 45 laboratory and school breakfast studies to determine if breakfast really does have an impact on children's performance at school.¹ The balance of evidence suggested eating breakfast is more beneficial than skipping breakfast among school children. It appears to be more important that the children eat rather than the specific size

or type of breakfast consumed.

Breakfast clubs

The evidence on the benefits of breakfast led to the introduction of breakfast initiatives such as breakfast clubs in schools, e.g. in the UK in the late 1990s.⁷ Apart from the nutritional benefits, breakfast clubs also give children opportunities for social interaction, provide a calm start to the day and have been found to improve punctuality, behaviour and attendance, all of which are likely to have a beneficial impact on children's learning. However, although improvements in children's motivation and concentration during morning lessons are reported in most breakfast club studies, benefits were most apparent in children with sub-optimal nutritional status at the outset.¹

European Breakfast Campaign

With breakfast having a multitude of benefits, yet so many children skipping, it is not surprising that the 'Breakfast is Best' Campaign was launched in 2008 to promote the importance of breakfast.⁸ The European Medical Association, The European Federation of the Association of Dietitians, The European Association of Teachers, and other European health authorities are already behind the campaign, which is supported by the European Commission's Directorate General Health & Consumers. The aim of the initiative is to promote the benefits of breakfast to European policy makers and to encourage the use of messages like 'eat breakfast everyday' in public health campaigns and school curricula.

Setting a good example

Breakfast improves overall nutrient intake and is associated with performance and weight control, given that individual calorie requirements are respected.^{1,6} Children and adolescents are most likely to eat breakfast in families where the adults eat breakfast themselves, so parents must be encouraged to set a good example.⁹ Where this is not possible, school breakfast clubs provide a good alternative, serving up a nutritious breakfast and a host of important social benefits too.

References

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