

Breakfast

Summary

- A healthy breakfast has many health benefits, so try not to skip it.
 - Breakfast replenishes the stores of energy and nutrients in your body.
 - People who do not have breakfast may not meet their recommended daily intakes of fibre, vitamins and minerals.
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Breakfast is often called 'the most important meal of the day', and for good reason. As the name suggests, breakfast breaks the overnight fasting period. It replenishes your supply of glucose to boost your energy levels and alertness, while also providing other essential nutrients required for good health.

Many studies have shown the health benefits of eating breakfast. It improves your energy levels and ability to concentrate in the short term, and can help with better weight management, reduced risk of type 2 diabetes and heart disease in the long term.

Despite the benefits of breakfast for your health and wellbeing, many people often skip it, for a variety of reasons. The good news is there are plenty of ways to make it easier to fit breakfast into your day.

Why breakfast is so important

When you wake up from your overnight sleep, you may not have eaten for up to 10 hours. Breakfast replenishes the stores of energy and nutrients in your body.

Energy

The body's energy source is glucose. Glucose is broken down and absorbed from the carbohydrates you eat. The body stores most of its energy as fat. But your body also stores some glucose as glycogen, most of it in your liver, with smaller amounts in your muscles.

During times of fasting (not eating), such as overnight, the liver breaks down glycogen and releases it into your bloodstream as glucose to keep your blood sugar levels stable. This is especially important for your brain, which relies almost entirely on glucose for energy.

In the morning, after you have gone without food for as long as 12 hours, your glycogen stores are low. Once all of the energy from your glycogen stores is used up, your body starts to break down fatty acids to produce the energy it needs. But without carbohydrate, fatty acids are only partially oxidised, which can reduce your energy levels.

Eating breakfast boosts your energy levels and restores your glycogen levels ready to keep your metabolism up for the day.

Skipping breakfast may seem like a good way to reduce overall energy intake. But research shows that even with a higher intake of energy, breakfast eaters tend to be more physically active in the morning than those who don't eat until later in the day.

Essential vitamins, minerals and nutrients

Breakfast foods are rich in key nutrients such as folate, **calcium**

(<http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/calcium>)

, iron, B vitamins and fibre. Breakfast provides a lot of your day's total nutrient intake. In fact, people who eat breakfast are more likely to meet their recommended daily intakes of vitamins and minerals than people who don't.

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.

Breakfast helps you control your weight

People who regularly eat breakfast are less likely to be overweight or obese. Research is ongoing as to why this is the case. It is thought that eating breakfast may help you control your weight because:

- it prevents large fluctuations in your blood glucose levels, helping you to control your appetite
- breakfast fills you up before you become really hungry, so you're less likely to just grab whatever foods are nearby when hunger really strikes (for example high energy, high fat foods with added sugars or salt).

Breakfast boosts brainpower

If you don't have breakfast, you might find you feel a bit sluggish and struggle to focus on things. This is because your brain hasn't received the energy (glucose) it needs to get going. Studies suggest that not having breakfast affects your mental performance, including your attention, ability to concentrate and memory. This can make some tasks feel harder than they normally would.

Children and adolescents who regularly eat breakfast also tend to perform better academically compared with those who skip breakfast. They also feel a greater level of connectedness with teachers and other adults at their school, which leads to further positive health and academic outcomes.

A healthy breakfast may reduce the risk of illness

Compared with people who don't have breakfast, those who regularly eat breakfast tend to have a lower risk of both obesity and type 2 diabetes. There is also some evidence that people who don't have breakfast may be at a higher risk of cardiovascular disease.

Breakfast helps you make better food choices

People who eat breakfast generally have more healthy diets overall, have better eating habits and are less likely to be hungry for snacks during the day than people who skip breakfast. Children who eat an inadequate breakfast are more likely to make poor food choices not only for the rest of the day, but also over the longer term.

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 people 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, veggie sticks and hommus, or a wholemeal sandwich to help you through that mid-morning hunger.

Skipping breakfast

Skipping breakfast was shown to be common in the most recent national nutrition survey of Australian children and adolescents, although the majority did not skip breakfast consistently.

Those most likely to skip breakfast were older females, and people who:

- are under or overweight
- have a poor diet
- have lower physical activity levels
- do not get enough sleep
- are from single-parent or lower income households.

Some common reasons for skipping breakfast include:

- not having enough time or wanting to spend the extra time being in bed
- trying to lose weight
- too tired to bother
- bored of the same breakfast foods
- don't feel hungry in the morning
- no breakfast foods readily available in the house
- the cost of buying breakfast foods
- cultural reasons.

While skipping breakfast is not recommended, good nutrition is not just about the number of meals you have each day. If you don't have breakfast, aim to make up for the nutritional content you missed at breakfast with your lunch and dinner.

Ideas for healthy 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:

- porridge made from rolled oats – when choosing quick oats, go for the plain variety and add your own fruit afterwards as the flavoured varieties tend to have a lot of added sugar
- wholegrain cereal (such as untoasted muesli, bran cereals or whole-wheat biscuits) with milk, natural yoghurt and fresh fruit
- fresh fruits and raw nuts
- wholemeal, wholegrain or sourdough toast, or English muffins or crumpets with baked beans, poached or boiled eggs, tomatoes, mushrooms, spinach, salmon, cheese, avocado

or a couple of teaspoons of spreads such as hommus or 100% nut pastes (such as peanut or almond butter)

- smoothies made from fresh fruit or vegetables, natural yoghurt and milk
- natural yoghurt with some fresh fruit added for extra sweetness and some raw nuts for crunchiness.

If you're time poor you can still have breakfast

Early starts, long commutes and busy morning schedules mean many of us don't make time to sit down to breakfast before heading out for the day. Whatever your reason for being time poor in the morning, there are still ways that you can fit in breakfast. Some ideas include:

- Prepare some quick and healthy breakfast foods the night before or on the weekend, such as zucchini slice, healthy muffins or overnight oats (rolled oats soaked in milk overnight in the fridge – just add fruit/nuts and serve). A pre-prepared breakfast means you can grab it and eat at home, on the way to work or once you get to your destination.
- Keep some breakfast foods at work (if allowed) to enjoy once you arrive.
- Get in the habit of setting your alarm for 10 to 15 minutes earlier than usual to give you time to have breakfast at home.
- Swap out any time-wasting habits in the morning (such as checking your emails or scrolling social media) and use this time for breakfast instead.
- Prepare for the next day the night before to free up time in the morning to have breakfast.

Can't face food in the morning?

Some people find they just can't tolerate food first thing in the morning – perhaps because they have their last meal of the day quite late at night or they don't find typical breakfast foods appealing, or because food first thing in the morning turns their stomach.

If it's hard for you to eat food first thing in the morning, you might like to try:

- reducing the size of your meals in the evening and eating them earlier so you're hungry in the morning
- investigating some new recipes and stocking your cupboards with some different types of foods to increase your breakfast appetite
- switching your breakfast to morning tea or mid-morning snack time instead – perhaps try some of the portable breakfast ideas listed above so you've got healthy options ready to go when you feel ready for your mid-morning breakfast.

Where to get help

- Your GP (doctor)
 - Dietitians Association of Australia
(<http://www.daa.asn.au/>)
Tel. 1800 812 942
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