Not a moment to waste:
Rescuing the Breakfast Habit

Whatever happened to breakfast?
Not long ago, we all used to eat breakfast at the kitchen table, while catching up on homework or reading the paper. Now the general trend shows the breakfast experience has declined in recent years.

Back in 1995 virtually every school kid would eat breakfast before venturing out the door. Now, one in 10 school kids skip breakfast. Unfortunately, as children get older they are more likely to give breakfast a miss, with nearly one in four teenagers skipping.

The adults aren’t setting a good example either. In the most recent survey barely six out of 10 are eating breakfast every morning. Clearly, eating breakfast is not as easy as we thought.

Why is breakfast on the decline?
The two most common reasons we hear for missing breakfast is ‘lack of time’ and ‘not feeling like eating first thing in the morning’. Sadly, a small number still think that avoiding breakfast helps weight loss.

Time pressure is due, partly, to Australians working three hours a week longer, on average, than the rest of the western world. For those employed:

- Three in five feel “always or often” rushed during the day. That rises to three in four if working for at least 40 hours a week.
- Half say that work prevents them from doing physical exercise.
- More than a third say that work prevents them from eating healthy meals.
- Fewer than one in 10 breakfast eaters ate it outside of the house 20 years ago. Since then it has doubled, with around one in five employees now desktop dining on arrival at work.

Breakfast skipping increases as children age

- 2% of 2-3 yr-olds skip
- 3% of 4-8 yr-olds skip
- 13% of 9-13 yr-olds skip
- 24% of 14-16 yr-olds skip
Better weight

Those who regularly eat breakfast, and particularly breakfast cereals, have a lower BMI and a healthier body weight than those who skip breakfast. This association is consistent for children, adolescents and adults 6-14. Interestingly, children who eat pre-sweetened cereals have a similar BMI to children who eat lower sugar cereals15. Also, nine out of 10 overweight people who successfully lost weight for over six years reported eating breakfast nearly every day16.

We have to convince those that have stopped eating breakfast to return, because there is new and robust evidence that it is a wise health decision. There are four distinct rewards to dining soon after waking.

Better brain performance

If someone told you that breakfast could help you be smarter and think better, you would be eating it in a flash, wouldn’t you?

1. A new Australian study of 824 children in grades 3-7 indicates that breakfast is critical for school performance in children19. Eating breakfast, especially a good quality breakfast, and being active boosts both literacy and numeracy skills.

2. There is long-term better mental health from eating a breakfast with at least three core food groups, according to an Australian study of adolescents20.

3. These studies are further support to a review of 50 years of research on breakfast and cognition in children and adolescents21. It concluded that eating breakfast is better for brain function than missing breakfast. Again, the quality of the breakfast also had a positive influence on school performance.

Why does a good quality breakfast help the brain?

It makes sense that after eight to 12 hours without food that your brain would appreciate some nutrition, especially if you are young.

1. It provides key nutrients for neurotransmitter production and brain function, such as glucose from carbohydrate foods and B group vitamins, folate and iron from breakfast cereals22.

2. A low GI breakfast was better for cognitive skills when compared to a high GI breakfast or no breakfast at all, in adolescents23 or when compared to a simulated high GI meal in adults24.
Better nutrition all day long

We know from the National Nutrition Study of 1995 that breakfast eaters have more adequate diets and are more than twice as likely to get enough protein, calcium, magnesium, iron, thiamin and riboflavin. Now, there is more data:

- Australian boys who eat breakfast cereals have a more nutrient dense breakfast than non-cereal consumers. They have higher intakes of most essential nutrients, including fibre, through the day when compared to breakfast skippers.

Missing breakfast is a lost nutrition opportunity. That means when breakfast is skipped, the ‘lost’ nutrients are not being made up later in the day.
The return of the breakfast experience

We need to improve breakfast consumption for the benefit of kids and adults. Unfortunately, two distinct barriers stop the skippers returning to breakfast: lack of time and lack of morning hunger.

We have to devise a way to break through. Parents are powerful role models for their children. By convincing more adults to eat breakfast, the habit is likely to flow through to their children.

We have very persuasive arguments. With breakfast, the children could do better at school and the adults themselves could perform better during the day. They could be better nourished, be in better health and have a healthier body weight. That’s a pretty good return on a 10 minute daily investment.

But what to eat? Let’s face it, a banana as they walk out the door, cereal and yogurt on arrival at the work desk, whatever is quick, tasty and hits the spot. I would prefer that a quiet 10 minutes be devoted to fuelling the body, muscles and brain first thing in the morning. Yet we must accept that breakfast has moved from being quick to instantaneous.

Make breakfast a discussion point with teachers, parents, young adults, kids, indeed everyone. Tell people the four excellent reasons to eat breakfast at every opportunity: school visits, workplace talks, seminars, conference presentations, wherever.

References:


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