Breakfast is a simple step towards a healthy lifestyle.

Widely recognized as the most important meal of the day, the literature reports many associated health benefits with eating breakfast. This body of evidence in essence answers “why” we should have breakfast. Other research focuses on “how” people become regular breakfast consumers, including identifying the social and behavioural context of breakfast eaters.

Breakfast is recognized as one habit of good physical health status.
Eating Breakfast is a Healthy Habit

Early work by Belloc and Breslow recognized breakfast as one of the “seven healthy habits” for maintaining good physical health status. Using data gathered from 6928 residents of Alameda County, California (age >16yr), they found that people who ate breakfast almost everyday reported better overall physical health status than breakfast skippers. Furthermore, the relationship among the seven habits was shown to be cumulative. People who reported all or many of the healthy habits were in better physical health than those who maintained fewer such habits, independent of age, sex and economic status. This early work laid the foundation for future research on breakfast as an important lifestyle habit.

More recent studies support that breakfast eaters tend to have healthier lifestyle habits than breakfast skippers.

• Keski-Rahkonen and colleagues examined breakfast skipping along with other health compromising behaviours in adolescents (n=5448, 16yr) and their parents (n=4660). Results showed that breakfast skippers were significantly more likely to smoke, drink alcohol frequently and use more coffee and caffeinated sodas than breakfast eaters. In addition, breakfast skippers were less likely to exercise and tended to have a higher body mass index than breakfast eaters. In parents, less sleep, shift work and feeling tired in the morning were also associated with more frequent breakfast skipping.

• Smith investigated breakfast skipping and self-reports of health status in university students (n=189, 19-21yr). Scores from questionnaires revealed significant negative trends in measures of depression, anxiety and sleep duration in breakfast skippers compared with breakfast eaters.

• Vereecken and colleagues examined the association of daily breakfast consumption with positive lifestyle behaviours. This cross-sectional study used data collected in school children (n=204534, 11-15yr) across 41 countries by the World Health Organization in the Health Behaviour Survey (2005-2006). Results revealed that breakfast consumers were more likely to be non-smokers and physically active, and to have higher daily fruit and vegetable intakes. In contrast, breakfast skippers were more likely to drink alcohol and watch television on a daily basis.

Eating Breakfast is a Learned Habit

Given the link between breakfast and good health, it is important to understand the reasons some individuals routinely eat breakfast and others do not. Research suggests that behavioural norms – including breakfast habits – largely reflect behaviours that people have learned to be appropriate or desirable in their social context. The family environment is one such social context that can be an important determinant in the breakfast behaviour of children. Research has examined features such as parental role modelling, the presence of parents at the morning meal and parental support on the likeliness of routine breakfast consumption by their children.
Parental Role Modelling

A strong predictor of childhood and adolescent breakfast eating is parental breakfast eating. Keski-Rahkonen and colleagues found that 82% of adolescents of breakfast-eating parents ate breakfast every morning, whereas 48% of adolescents of breakfast-skipping parents did so. This influence of parental breakfast eating is further supported in findings from a systematic review of 24 studies on breakfast and the role of the family. Examining several family correlates (including the availability of breakfast items, parental education level, family income, parental presence at home and family communication), the authors concluded that parental breakfast eating and living in two-parent families had the greatest correlation to adolescent breakfast consumption.

Parental Presence

Another factor influencing breakfast eating in children is the presence of parents at mealtime. In a cross-sectional study, DeJong and colleagues examined various environmental correlates of breakfast consumption in 12-15 year olds (n=1089). Results showed that having breakfast with a parent five to seven times per week, and interestingly, always having the evening meal with a parent significantly increased the odds of their children eating breakfast daily. Work by Merten and colleagues further supports the role of parental presence at breakfast. In their prospective descriptive study of adolescents (n=7788, 11-18yr) using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, they found that having at least one parent home in the morning increased the likelihood of adolescents eating breakfast and predicted future breakfast consumption into young adulthood.

Parental Support

Parental support also plays a positive role in the formation and maintenance of breakfast habits. Hallström and colleagues studied the role of family in breakfast food choices of adolescents (n=3528, 13-17yr). Boys whose parents gave little or no encouragement to eat a healthy diet were less likely to be regular breakfast consumers compared with boys who received parental encouragement. However, in girls, the behaviours of their peers were found to be more influential than the role of their parents – namely, girls whose peers ate unhealthily were less likely to be regular breakfast consumers compared with girls whose peers ate healthily. Research exploring other forms of parental support such as “breakfast rules” (eating breakfast daily and defining allowable or acceptable foods) and food availability has shown that breakfast rules and having available breakfast products are also associated with daily breakfast consumption in children.
Breakfast Consumption into Young Adulthood

As children grow up, factors other than parental influence may determine their breakfast eating behaviours, and young adults begin to self-regulate their behaviour. Wong and Mullan conducted a prospective study of determinants of breakfast consumption in 96 undergraduate students, including to examine the link between intention and behaviour. Components of intention to eat breakfast (attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behaviour control) were measured using a behavioural questionnaire, and information on past breakfast behaviour was collected. Results showed that breakfast eating was strongly correlated to the intention to eat breakfast (accounting for 63.6% of the variance). However, the strongest correlation was past breakfast behaviour (accounting for 74.3%). The authors concluded that although the intention to eat breakfast is important, past breakfast behaviour (habit) more strongly predicts the likeliness of eating breakfast in the future. Similar findings have been reported by Merten and colleagues in their study showing past breakfast behaviour in adolescents (age 12-19yr) was a strong predictor of breakfast at age 26.

The Bottom Line

Breakfast is a healthy habit which is important to start early and worth maintaining for a lifetime. Research indicates children and adolescents tend to eat breakfast when their parents are breakfast eaters and create positive breakfast environments. Moreover, studies have demonstrated that breakfast eaters during childhood and adolescence are more likely to maintain their breakfast habit into adulthood.

This concludes the first series of nutrition newsletters from Kellogg Canada. We hope we have re-ignited your interest in the health benefits of breakfast. Dietitians are leaders in promoting health by both knowledge-sharing and action. When it comes to breakfast, the best leadership can be through action — lead by example and eat a healthy breakfast every day!