

The Many Benefits of Breakfast

The right breakfast foods can help you concentrate, give you strength – even help you maintain a healthy weight.

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Your mother was right: Breakfast really is the most important meal of the day. Not only does it give you energy to start a new day, but breakfast is linked to many health benefits, including weight control and improved performance.

Studies show that eating a *healthy* breakfast (as opposed to the kind containing doughnuts) can help give you:

- A more nutritionally complete diet, higher in nutrients, vitamins and minerals
- Improved concentration and performance in the classroom or the boardroom
- More strength and endurance to engage in physical activity
- Lower cholesterol levels

Eating breakfast is important for everyone, but is especially so for children and adolescents. According to the American Dietetic Association, children who eat breakfast perform better in the classroom and on the playground, with better concentration, problem-solving skills, and eye-hand coordination.

Breakfast Benefit: Weight Control

Many studies, in both adults and children, have shown that breakfast eaters tend to weigh less than breakfast skippers.

Why? One theory suggests that eating a healthy breakfast can reduce hunger throughout the day, and help people make better food choices at other meals. While it might seem you could save calories by skipping breakfast, this is not an effective strategy. Typically, hunger gets the best of breakfast-skippers, and they eat more at lunch and throughout the day.

Another theory behind the breakfast-weight control link implies that eating breakfast is part of a healthy lifestyle that includes making wise food choices and balancing calories with exercise. For example, consider the successful losers followed by the National Weight Control Registry, all of whom have lost at least 30 pounds and kept it off at least one year. Some 80% of the people in the Registry regularly eat breakfast (and also follow a calorie-controlled, low-fat diet).

It's worth noting that most studies linking breakfast to weight control loss looked at a healthy breakfast containing protein and/or whole grains -- not meals loaded with fat and calories.

Make Lean Protein Part of Your Breakfast

Adding a little lean protein to your breakfast may be just the boost you need to help keep you feeling full until lunchtime.

"Protein blunts your hunger the most, and is the most satiating," Purdue University researcher Wayne Campbell, PhD, tells WebMD.

And a traditional breakfast of eggs may be one of the best ways to get your morning protein. While eggs are not always associated with weight loss, they contain some of the highest-quality protein.

In a study presented at the 2007 Experimental Biology meeting, researchers at Pennington Biomedical Research Center compared weight loss in women who ate either two eggs or a bagel for breakfast. The two breakfast meals were identical in calories and volume.

"Compared to the bagel eaters, overweight women who ate two eggs for breakfast five times a week for eight weeks as part of a low-fat, reduced-calorie diet, lost 65% more weight, reduced waist circumference by 83%, reported higher energy levels, and had no significant difference in their ... blood cholesterol or triglyceride levels," reports researcher Nikhil V. Dhurandhar, PhD.

Another study, reported in the *Journal of the American College of Nutrition*, also substantiates eggs' ability to satisfy hunger.

"Both these studies show that when people eat eggs at breakfast, they felt more satisfied and consumed fewer calories throughout the day, compared to those who ate a primarily carbohydrate meal like a bagel," explains Dhurandhar.

But what about the cholesterol in eggs? A large egg contains 75 calories, 6 grams of protein, and 212 mg cholesterol. According to the American Heart Association (AHA), healthy people can eat an egg a day.

"It should be noted in our study that none of the women had increases in blood lipids, confirming that healthy adults on a low-fat diet can enjoy eggs without significantly impacting their risk of heart disease," says Dhurandhar.

Another study, reported in *Obesity Research*, found that women who added a little lean protein to their breakfast (in the form of a slice of Canadian bacon added to an egg sandwich made with an English muffin) felt less hunger during the next four hours than those who ate a breakfast without protein.

All the participants lost about 18 pounds over the course of the study, but the group eating more protein – about 30% of total calories – kept more lean muscle than the group who ate the same number of calories but less protein.

Experts note that lean muscle mass is more metabolically active, and thus helps with weight management.

Breakfast Cereal and Weight Control

Many studies have also shown that when breakfast cereal is consumed as part of an overall healthful lifestyle, it can play a role in maintaining a healthy body weight.

A Harvard study of more than 17,000 men found that those who frequently ate breakfast cereal -- both refined grain and whole-grain types -- consistently weighed less than those who rarely or never ate breakfast cereal.

Another study, published in the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, evaluated the diets of adults and found that breakfasts of ready-to-eat cereal were associated with lower BMIs in women than other, higher-fat breakfast meals.

Choosing the Right Breakfast Foods

This just goes to show how important it is to choose the right foods for breakfast. A healthy breakfast meal should contain a variety of foods, including fruits, vegetables, whole grains, low- or non-fat dairy, and lean protein.

Even if you think you don't have time to eat breakfast, there are grab-and-go options that fill the bill. Some quick and healthy choices include:

- A veggie omelet and a piece of whole-wheat toast

- A whole-wheat English muffin with low-fat cheese, a scrambled egg, and slice of tomato or lean ham
- Smoothie made with fruit and low-fat yogurt
- Salmon on 1/2 whole-grain bagel with light cream cheese
- Whole-grain cereal with fresh fruit and low-fat milk
- Oatmeal made with skim milk, raisins and nuts, with 4 ounces of orange juice
- Low-fat yogurt and a piece of fresh fruit
- Yogurt smoothie and breakfast bar
- Hard-boiled egg and a banana