

The A.M. Meal Makes A Difference

The custom of eating a meal at the start of the day is observed in cultures all over the world. Does this make breakfast man's most important meal? Perhaps. Research, for instance, shows that eating breakfast improves intellectual performance and the ability to concentrate and solve problems at the same time as it increases the nutrient content of a person's diet. On the flip side, skipping breakfast has been proven to cause fatigue, decrease the body's metabolic rate, increase snacking during the day and lead to weight gain.

Most of the research on the importance of breakfast has been done with children. Studies show that test scores improve when children are given a morning meal. Not that cereal, milk and juice make kids smarter, but their attention span is increased making it possible for more learning to take place.

Breakfast eaters (both children and adults) consume more essential nutrients like calcium, fiber and vitamins C, B-1 and B-2 than do breakfast skippers. Generally speaking, better nutrition means better resistance to infection (see related story page 1).

Stretching that point even further, results of a University of California study showed that breakfast eaters actually lived longer than breakfast skippers. Of course, other factors could be responsible for the findings. For example, people who eat breakfast may also exercise more, and the activity could be the factor responsible for their longevity. Still, the California finding is a provocative one.

Probably the most compelling argument in support of a morning repast is its role in weight management. When a person gets up in the morning with an empty stomach, blood sugar is literally at a "fasting" or very low level. Eating

shortly after rising causes the body's furnace to heat up as it burns off the calories of that first meal. Called the "thermic effect of food," it increases after each meal throughout the day. Skipping breakfast, on the other hand, keeps the furnace cold longer and ultimately burns fewer calories.

People who don't eat breakfast have metabolic rates four to five percent below normal, according to Wayne Calloway, M.D. of George Washington University, Washington, D.C. As a result of this metabolic slump, a breakfast skipper could expect to gain one pound every seven weeks (about 8 pounds per year)—even if his calorie intake remained the same.

Clearly, breakfast is a good idea. To those who say they can't eat in the morning, Dr. Calloway replies, "Nonsense." Eating is an environmental response, he says. And breakfast skippers must condition themselves to eat in the morning by eating lighter and earlier the night before. Even a confirmed breakfast skipper will soon find himself waking up hungry, says Calloway.

But what constitutes a good morning meal? The answer is not as pat as the bacon-and-eggs menu at the local coffee shop would suggest. The choices for breakfast are unlimited. Here are a few quick a.m. menu options:

Leftover Pudding

Combine tonight's leftover rice, macaroni, stale bread, kasha or couscous with lowfat milk, chopped fruit, beaten egg white and the sweetener and seasonings of your choice. Bake until set. Refrigerate overnight and scoop up a quick dish in the morning.

Sunrise Stuffed Potatoes

Bake a potato in the microwave

oven. Then split it and fill with some leftovers in the fridge—chili, spaghetti sauce, low-fat cheese, stew, pea soup—whatever is appealing—then reheat.

Layered Breakfast 'Shortcakes'

Start with a frozen waffle or pancake. Drop it in the toaster. Then spread on a layer of peanut butter, warm applesauce or other fruit puree, vanilla yogurt or cinnamon-sprinkled cottage cheese. Now top it off with a teaspoon of chopped nuts, juice-packed canned fruit or nugget-type cereal.

Breakfast Pizzas

For something really different, try the a.m. version of pizza. Individual pizzas are easy to make with English muffins or bagels topped with part skim mozzarella cheese and ham slices or Canadian bacon (both are low-fat). Experienced breakfast eaters may even want to add a spicy tomato sauce (left over or from a jar); but it may be too much for beginners.

Cereal Sundaes

To make standard breakfast cereals more exciting, make up zip-lock bags full of add-ins like chopped dried apricots, banana chips, almonds, toasted wheat germ and raisins. Mix and match these "sundae toppings" to create a different cereal every morning. They're just as good with hot cereals as they are with cold.

High Fiber Yogurt

For people with little time in the morning to sit down for breakfast, take a carton of plain, vanilla or lemon yogurt and stir a crunchy, high-fiber cereal right into the yogurt carton. It's satisfying, nutritious and it's portable.

—Robyn Flipse, M.S., R.D.

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