



e-quilibrium

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Breakfast

Over the past several decades, the proportion of people skipping breakfast has nearly doubled, so that nearly a quarter of adults don't eat breakfast, while up to a third of teenagers skip breakfast. At the same time, the number of people who are overweight or obese has skyrocketed. Is this coincidental or is there a causal relationship?

Research on behaviors related to food consumption can be difficult to do, in part because most studies rely on some form of self-report regarding food intake. Since self-report can be quite unreliable in spite of steps that investigators take to increase its precision, caution is appropriate when interpreting results of self-report data. There have been relatively few experimental studies that focus on breakfast consumption, so most of what we know comes from observational studies that involve self-report.

With this caveat, the preponderance of studies indicate that breakfast consumption is associated with lower body mass index (BMI) and/or less weight gain. That is, on average, persons who eat breakfast tend to either maintain healthier weights or gain less weight over a specified period of time than persons who skip breakfast. This has been the case in research done with children and adolescents, as well as adults. Additionally, the National Weight Control Registry, which follows individuals who have successfully lost weight and kept the weight off, has found that regularly eating breakfast is one of the most common behavioral factors found among such persons.

For some individuals, the reason given for skipping breakfast is lack of time in the morning, particularly lack of time for the preparation of food. Interestingly, some of the studies have found that a breakfast consisting of ready-to-eat cereal is associated with lower BMIs than breakfasts that include foods that need to be cooked (such as meat and eggs). Eating breakfast does not have to consume a good deal of time.

Another common reason given for skipping breakfast is weight control. The logic is that if one skips a meal, there will be a lower net intake of calories for the day. Much of the research suggests that this is faulty logic, because skipping breakfast is frequently associated with a higher daily intake of calories. It is also noteworthy that in the few studies in which persons eating breakfast had a higher daily caloric intake than those not eating breakfast, the people who ate breakfast still gained less weight than those who skipped breakfast!

There are a number of hypotheses for why regular breakfast consumption is associated with better weight management. Persons who eat breakfast may be less prone to overeating later in the day when the calories are less likely to be utilized with activity. Also, eating early in the day appears to aid appetite control through the rest of the day, perhaps through effects on satiety. Eating breakfast is associated with eating more frequently during the day, a process which may foster increased energy consumption through thermogenesis (calories the body burns while digesting and absorbing food). Persons who eat breakfast have been found to be more likely to practice other healthful behaviors (e.g., physical activity, not smoking, better overall quality of diet). Furthermore, other metabolic and physiologic processes (i.e., glucose and lipid metabolism) have been suggested as contributory to the weight management benefit of eating breakfast.

If there is irony in all of this, it would be that eating is recommended for persons desiring to lose or manage weight... eating in the morning, that is, as well as eating small frequent meals!

(Please note that the author will not realize any monetary gain should readers increase their consumption of breakfast cereal.)

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