

Eating breakfast - even twice - is truly the healthier choice

Skipping the morning meal doesn't prevent weight gain in kids

By Elizabeth Grossman, April 3, 2016



Breakfast is food for the brain and for the rest of your body, note experts in children's nutrition. And downing those morning calories are worth it, even for people concerned about their weight, a new study finds. Middle-school students who ate breakfast were more likely to have healthy weights than were those who skipped breakfast. This was true even for students who ate two breakfasts – one at home and one at school.

“Not skipping breakfast sets you up to not overeat later in the day,” concludes Marlene Schwartz. This psychologist studies obesity and directs the Rudd Center for Obesity & Food Policy at the University of Connecticut in Hartford. She also is an author of the new study.

Breakfast is considered so important that many schools now serve it as well as lunch. But at least one study has found that a lot of these kids who take part can end up eating two breakfasts, Schwartz notes. People became concerned that kids who ate breakfast at home and at school might become obese. In fact, Schwartz now notes, that's not what her data have turned up.

Her group studied some 600 middle-school students. Over three years, students from 12 different schools – in fifth, sixth and seventh grades – were asked about their breakfasts. Throughout the study about 34 to 44 percent of all students said they regularly ate breakfast at home. Up to 17 percent, or almost one in every six kids, regularly ate breakfast at school. Overall, about one in every 10 kids reported downing breakfasts both at home and at school.

Eating habits changed somewhat as the kids got older. For instance, fifth graders were more likely to regularly eat breakfast at home. But by seventh grade, 22 percent of the studied kids skipped breakfast frequently.

Surprisingly, at every age, kids who ate breakfast were less likely to be overweight. This was true even for those who ate breakfast at home and at school.

Indeed, the study found no evidence of greater weight gain among students who ate double breakfasts. Rather, it found that students who skipped breakfast most often were those most likely to be overweight or obese.

Schwartz's team reported its findings March 17 in *Pediatric Obesity*.

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What's going on?

The findings may seem puzzling. Yet Schwartz and her colleagues can think of several possible explanations.

Skipping breakfast may set people up to later in the day be “over-hungry,” she says. Then someone may eat more food than their body needs, says Schwartz. When that happens, it might take the brain longer to realize “you have enough food and can stop eating now.” If true, she says, skipping breakfast may actually set a person up to eat too many calories over the rest of the day.

Earlier studies have shown this to be the case, says Diana Cutts. “The total calories taken in over 24 hours are less when you eat a good breakfast,” notes Cutts, who did not take part in the new study. A pediatrician, she works at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis.

“Eating healthy in the morning is really what you need to have energy,” she says. “When you deprive yourself of eating breakfast, it’s not good for your body and not good for your brain.” It’s also “not good for the really complex biochemistry that we rely on,” she adds. Not eating in the morning upsets the rhythm of hormones and enzymes that keep our brains and bodies working well.

John Cook agrees. “I think breakfast might be the most important meal of the day,” says this researcher on childhood hunger. Cook works at Boston Medical Center in Massachusetts and with an organization called Children’s HealthWatch. “It’s very difficult for children to focus on school if they arrive without having breakfast,” he says. The ability of middle-school students to pay attention and behave really depends on stoking their engines with food early in the day.

A fast is a time when someone doesn’t eat. So breakfast, as its name implies, Cook explains, breaks the overnight fast. During sleep, the body stays active and the body's *metabolism* remains quite high. “You’re not totally relaxed during sleep. Your muscles are using calories,” he says. And upon waking, he says “You need these calories for both your body and your brain.”

But why should eating *two* breakfasts not lead to weight gain? The researchers don’t know — yet. The study did not ask kids what they ate. It only asked if they ate breakfast and where. But one explanation may be that school breakfasts are very healthy and controlled in size, notes Schwartz. A bowl of cereal with milk and a piece of fruit is typical. So eating that along with a home breakfast may not be too many calories for active, growing middle schoolers, she says.

The double-breakfast eaters also tended to be boys. These kids are active and actively growing. “They are a species unto themselves calorically,” Schwartz quips, “and sometimes eat twice as much as other people.”

That said, “I don’t want this study to make people think that if they only have one breakfast they should now have two,” says Schwartz. “The most important thing is that you eat one.”

Source: <https://student.societyforscience.org/article/eating-breakfast-%E2%80%94-even-twice-%E2%80%94-truly-healthier-choice>