

Does skipping breakfast help with weight loss?

Evidence on a page is a series of brief evidence summaries from NOO focusing on common beliefs around food, diet and nutrition

Some people choose to skip breakfast because they think it will help them lose weight. What is the role of breakfast in maintaining a healthy weight?

Children and adolescents

There is a large amount of research evidence relating weight status in children and adolescents to eating breakfast. In 2005, a review of the literature found that although breakfast eaters tend to consume more daily calories, they are less likely to be overweight.¹ A follow-up review in 2009 found that most cross-sectional studies reported that eating breakfast was associated with a reduced risk for overweight or obesity. However, the authors noted that many of the studies failed to take into account the energy intake and physical activity levels of the participants. The results of the longitudinal studies were ambiguous and appeared to be mediated by factors such as initial BMI status, physical activity, energy intake and dieting behaviours. Some studies pointed towards an association between eating breakfast and lower BMI, whilst others found either no association or an opposite association between the two.² Similar findings were also reported in a systematic review in 2011.³

Routinely eating breakfast is associated with more regular eating habits and exercise patterns, healthy food choices and consistent energy intake in children and adolescents.⁴ Children and adolescents who skip breakfast miss the opportunity to consume a nutrient-rich meal.⁵ In addition, evidence suggests that eating breakfast as part of a healthy diet and lifestyle is associated with children's health and well-being.¹

A number of studies show that:

- overweight or obese children and adolescents eat breakfast less frequently²
- girls tend to skip breakfast more than boys²
- skipping breakfast increases as children age into adolescence²
- parental breakfast eating and living in two parent families are positively associated with adolescent breakfast consumption, whilst socioeconomic deprivation is inversely associated with eating breakfast.⁶

Adults

There is much less evidence available on the relationship between eating breakfast and weight status in adults. In 2011, a systematic review reported inconsistent finding from cross-sectional studies, but highlighted two longitudinal studies on men, which found that eating breakfast could protect against weight gain.³ Eating breakfast has been associated with lower prevalence of overweight and obesity, more favourable nutritional profiles and healthy lifestyle behaviours.⁷ Regular breakfast consumption is also associated with diets of higher nutritional quality and higher self-reported health ratings among adults.⁸ A recent study found that as the reported breakfast amount increased, men's BMI decreased. The authors concluded that breakfast was part of a larger healthy lifestyle that seemed to incorporate health-promoting practices, including physical activity and dietary restraint (not eating between meals).⁹

Summary

Eating breakfast appears to be associated with more healthy body weights in children and adolescents as well as adults, despite possibly higher daily energy intakes in breakfast consumers. However, it is not clear whether there is a causal relationship with BMI or whether breakfast is merely a marker for other lifestyle factors that can contribute to healthy body weight.² Eating breakfast is likely to be of nutritional benefit and should be encouraged as part of an overall lifestyle strategy that includes a healthy diet and regular physical activity.

References

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