

Balancing Act!

Don't Forget Breakfast

Estimates vary, but around 25% of the population skips breakfast on a regular basis. The potential perils can include a more sluggish metabolism as the body shifts into starvation-response mode and a tendency to become ravenous and binge later, resulting in weight gain.

What many people fail to consider is that the body awakes in an energy-deprived state. Depending upon when dinner or the last evening snack was consumed, a person may have gone 10–15 hours without food. Normally, the body gets energy from fat and carbohydrates from food. Glucose, or sugar from carbohydrates, is needed to metabolize fat and is the exclusive fuel source for the brain and red blood cells. The liver's stored glycogen supplies the body with glucose throughout the night. "When you wake up, blood sugar may be low and the liver may be running low in glycogen," says Enette Larson-Meyer, PhD, RD, FACSM, nutrition professor at the University of Wyoming and author of *Vegetarian Sports Nutrition*. "This limits the glucose that is available for the energy needs of the brain and body."

Though some have demonized sugar and other carbs, Larson-Meyer says, "You do need glucose for brain function and—if you exercise in the morning—as a substrate for muscles so that you can get an intense workout in and recover well afterward. Studies in children have shown that a little sugar helps them think better and not be so sluggish."

Breakfast not only provides readily available calories for morning activity; it is also integral to obtaining essential nutrients. Protein is needed for muscle building and repair, as well as for other functions, including maintenance of hormones and enzymes. Additionally, breakfast can ensure an adequate day's supply of fiber, as well as vitamins, minerals and other micro-nutrients.

Does a black coffee with 1 teaspoon of sugar (15 calories) count? What about a 50-calorie apple? Is a doughnut okay? Is eating at 10:00 am as nourishing as eating at 7:00 am?

Breakfast means literally breaking the food fast that has occurred since the last evening meal. But how many calories are needed to qualify as "breakfast" and exactly when they are required are debatable questions.

"Usually we aim for breakfast providing 25%–30% of the calories for the day, so the amount will depend on a person's daily energy expenditure," says Larson-Meyer. A highly active female who eats 2,500 or more calories per day might have a breakfast of at least 600 calories, and an active male might have more.

A lower-calorie breakfast, such as a few egg whites or a piece of fruit, might suffice, but more energy may be needed sooner, especially if a workout is imminent.

Ideally, the morning meal should provide carbohydrates and fiber from fruits, vegetables and/or beans, as well as protein from low-fat milk or yogurt, eggs or plant sources such as nuts, beans and whole grains.

Something is better than nothing, a doughnut is okay if nothing more substantial is available, but keeping a stash of easy breakfast backups, like breakfast bars, nuts or even cold leftovers, can give you more nutritious choices and save you from filling up on empty calories. Don't be afraid to get creative: some cultures eat soups for breakfast, others eat beans (on toast or in bean burritos). Aim for a breakfast that provides energy and nutrients and that helps you feel satiated.

-Happy Breakfasts!

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