Building a Better Breakfast

Rushing to work? Getting your children off to school? Simply aren't hungry? We help you overcome the obstacles that keep you from eating—and enjoying—the most important meal of your day.

February 29, 2008 By Nicole Joseph

Yeah, you've heard it (many, many, many times) before—breakfast is the single most important meal of the day. It gives you energy! It boosts your concentration! It can even help you control your weight! Still, our busy schedules often make breakfast the least-eaten meal of the day. Chew on this: A 2005 ABC News poll found that four out of 10 Americans skip breakfast altogether. And many of those who do manage to grab a bite in the a.m. just wolf down the first thing they come across.

If you think skipping breakfast isn't a big deal, think again: Research has shown that starting your day with a nutritious meal can significantly reduce your risk of diabetes and heart disease. Many fiber-rich breakfast foods, like cereal, have been shown to help men cut their risk of stroke and colon cancer.

Also, adolescents who eat breakfast have been shown to perform better in school—they're more likely to have better problem-solving skills, eye–hand coordination and mental focus, according to the American Dietetic Association.
So why do we keep ditching this all-important meal? The reasons range from not feeling hungry in the morning to being short on time to working a second or even third job. Here, Real Health offers four common reasons why people might skip their breakfast-skipping scenarios. (We also asked breakfast genius Constance Brown-Riggs, a nutritionist in Massapequa, New York, to share her tips.)

You should have no trouble finding the scenario that applies most to you; you might even see yourself in all four.

Scenario 1: Not Hungry?
One of the most common reasons people skip breakfast is that they simply don't feel hungry before the sun comes up. And for those of us working to shed extra pounds, forcing down food when we don't feel hungry seems like a waste of calories. Still, even if you can't stomach the idea of a "breakfast of champions," your body needs fuel to start the day.

So avoid: late-night junk food binges (they can leave you feeling bloated and stuffed in the morning) and the misconception that breakfast has to be eaten all at once.

Try this: If you have to stay up late, avoid heavy snacking that will weigh you down and mess with your morning appetite. If your stomach still knots up at the idea of eating a plate full of food before lunchtime, Brown-Riggs says you don't have to eat breakfast all in one sitting, but recommends grazing, or gradually getting food into your body.

"Sometimes it's finding that one thing that you will be able to tolerate [that early]," says Brown-Riggs. Start with a glass of fresh fruit juice, and follow it up an hour or two later with some whole-grain toast or a few crackers.

Scenario 2: Getting Your Family out the Door
Getting children to wake up in time to get dressed is hard enough; fitting in a 20-minute sit-down breakfast can seem virtually impossible. Since parents have little time to prepare breakfast for themselves, and children seem to have even less time to eat it, the meal often becomes an excuse for young ones—and adults—to down an array of unhealthy breakfast goodies.

So avoid: sugary filled treats such as pop-tarts, donuts or toaster strudels. Though quick, these items are low in nutrition and high in fat and calories, and often leave you feeling hungry an hour later.

Try this: Children require a variety of nutrients to start their day. When thinking breakfast foods, think of how to get your children the most whole grains, protein, fruits and dairy. The American Dietetic Association recommends the following quick, healthy, kid-friendly options: ready-to-eat cereal paired with fruit and milk (try Honey Nut Cheerios; they taste sweet but only have 9 grams of sugar, and each serving is packed with fiber), or peanut butter on whole-wheat toast. And while the children are eating, grab some trail mix, fresh fruit, cereal bars (Health Valley's low-fat blueberry cobbler cereal bar is low in sodium and contains Vitamin B) or nuts for yourself.

Scenario 3: On the Road
Jumping in line for a quick, creamy, fatty latte or zipping into the McDrive-through might seem like the best way to grab a bite at your work desk before the morning meeting. But the road to work is littered with all sorts of temptingly convenient fast breakfast foods that can slow down your health.

So avoid: High-fat, fried choices like McDonald's McGriddle, Starbucks' sausage, egg and cheese sandwich...new morning items seem to arrive every week. One McGriddle, for example, has 560 calories and 32 grams of fat.

Try this: Brown-Riggs recommends that working folks on the go make smoothies at home to help fuel the commute: "Combine yogurt, fruit and soy milk—[you can] use vanilla soy for a little more flavor,"she says. Just toss everything into a blender the night before and pour your smoothie into a travel- friendly cup in the morning. Also, by having complete control over the ingredients you add

to the drink, you will know exactly what nutrients you're getting–and the bad ones you're avoiding.

If you must grab fast food, pick healthier options: Try Starbucks' low-fat cranberry apple muffin (with 6 grams of protein, 4 grams of fiber and only 2 grams of fat) or McDonald's fruit and walnut salad. Though the salad has 13 grams of fat, it also packs 5 grams of protein and 6 grams of fiber which will help you jump-start the day.

Scenario 4: The Night Shift
For the millions of people who don't work 9 to 5, how important is breakfast? Many people on the second and third shifts find themselves needing to "break their fast" midday or in late afternoon. It's easy to disregard traditional mealtimes and eat whenever you feel hungry—even at the end of a long shift, before hitting the sack.

So avoid: high-fat and fried foods, as part of dinner with the family before you head out the door. Or, worse, eating nothing at all.

Try this: People who work overnight often combine their precious little family time with dinnertime. You don't have to give that up. But if it's your first meal of the "day," be sure to incorporate the right kinds of fuel (low-fat protein, such as chicken or turkey; and fiber, such as veggies and whole grains) to get you through the night ahead. Remember: Your body doesn't know whether you're eating a steak sandwich or pancakes and sausage; it's just calculating the nutrients—or lack of them. "It can't distinguish whether that protein is coming from roast chicken or from eggs," says Brown-Riggs.

So if you don't feel like eating typical breakfast foods, start off with something filling and healthy. Try a roasted turkey sandwich with low-fat mayo, tomato and lettuce on whole-grain bread.

WHEN CASH IS TIGHT
What to do at the end of the month, when funds are low and the pantry is bare? Three tips for reducing your breakfast bill:

Go fish. Canned tuna is an affordable substitute for many breakfast meats, eggs and other forms of protein. You can make your own tuna salad sandwich with low-fat mayo and chopped vegetables (celery, onion, green peppers). Then slather it on a slice of whole-grain bread or toast, and head out the door feeling fortified and ready to go.

Go generic. Many store brands, including breakfast cereals, have the same amounts of nutrients as their name-brand counterparts—for just a fraction of the cost. If your kids are hooked on brand names, try buying plastic cereal containers that will hide the generic name while keeping your cereal tasty and fresh.

Buy oatmeal in bulk. High in fiber and low in fat, oatmeal can help you feel full—and help you stay that way until lunchtime. You can buy it cheaply in bulk and store it in your cupboard, where it will last a long time.

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