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MYTH #8 - YOU HAVE TO EAT BREAKFAST

By Michelle May, M.D.

Wow! Thanks for your great response to last month's article, "Don't Eat After 7 and Six Other Weight Management Myths." (If you missed it, you can check it out at <http://www.amihungry.com/pdf/newsletter-04-07.pdf>.) Apparently, I am not the only one that believes that rules aren't the answer!

Perhaps I'll call my next book "You OFF a Diet" (sorry Dr. Oz!)

You don't even have to be on a diet to have a head full of shoulds and shouldn'ts. In our information-driven society we are receiving a constant stream of news reports, research and expert advice telling us what to do.

Don't get me wrong. Smart choices based on a solid foundation are important. But to make long term lifestyle changes, it's essential that you THINK about how the information applies to you. You had a taste of that in last month's article (and in any workshops you've done with us) but let's dig a little deeper into another common "rule."

Myth: You HAVE to Eat Breakfast

Complete this sentence: Breakfast is _____.

I'll bet you said "...the most important meal of the day" right? This piece of wisdom is supported by numerous studies that have shown that people who eat breakfast:

- Function better (and in the case of children, perform better in school)
- Are less likely to overeat later in the day
- Weigh less than breakfast skippers



Invariably, someone in our workshops will say, "What's the big deal? I only skipped ONE meal!" Well, if you ate dinner at 6:00 pm, skipped breakfast and ate lunch at 12:00, you have gone 18 hours without eating.

That IS a big deal because that first meal after sleeping literally breaks your fast and prevents you from being too hungry to make mindful decisions later. In addition, eating breakfast reassures your metabolism that there's a reliable fuel supply so it doesn't need to slow down and conserve energy.

Then someone else will say, “But when I eat breakfast, I’m hungry all day.” Of course! When you kick start your metabolism with breakfast, your body will freely use the fuel then ask for more. The *kind* of fuel and the *amount* you eat will determine how often you get hungry (see below).

So what’s the myth? When I speak at any conference about the non-diet approach and hunger-based weight management, someone always asks, “So if a person *isn’t* hungry for breakfast, they don’t have to eat it, right?”

Right. But why aren’t they hungry? They have to answer that question first to figure out how breakfast might help them with their health and weight management goals in the long run.

The Chicken or the Egg

The association between lower body weight and eating breakfast might be a case of which came first. People who skip breakfast generally weigh more – but perhaps it’s because they overeat in the evening due to triggers like TV, boredom, habits or stress - so they don’t feel hungry when they first wake up.



Some people even get up and eat at night so there is no “fast” to break. Is breakfast important for them - or is it more important to address why they’re eating at night?

Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

In other cases, people who struggle with their weight skip breakfast because they feel that once they start eating, they won’t be able to stop. This becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. When they do finally eat, they’re overly hungry and feel out of control. That can lead to guilt and even more eating the rest of the day and into the evening. They go to bed determined they will “be good” tomorrow but wake up and repeat the cycle all over again.

If this sounds familiar, become aware of your overall eating pattern and remember to ask the question, “Am I hungry?” before you eat. Learning other ways to cope with head hunger, for example by finding something else to do besides eat in front of the TV at night, will allow you to feel hungry in the morning and eat breakfast. With practice you can break the cycle of skipping breakfast then overeating the rest of the day.

The Morning After

Even people who eat instinctively will sometimes have a heavy evening meal, for example, at a favorite restaurant for a special occasion. I notice that when I do, I’m usually not as hungry the next day - so I just wait until I am. Skipping breakfast on occasion won’t harm your metabolism and it allows you to intuitively balance your intake over the course of 24 hours or so.

Not a Morning Person

Some people just aren’t morning people and it takes their body a little while to wake up and give them the “eat” signal. That’s ok. You don’t have to eat within minutes of your feet hitting the floor. Just check in with yourself again in an hour or so to see if you are noticing hunger. You might have to retrain yourself so be prepared to eat a light breakfast. Before long you will have a healthy new habit.

Rush Hour

Maybe you feel it's too stressful in the morning to eat breakfast. So instead you slam a couple of cups of coffee while you're getting ready, rush around to get the kids to school, then race off to work and stress out in a traffic jam. All that caffeine and adrenaline might mask your hunger but ironically, skipping breakfast will make you even more irritable and less productive.



The obvious solution is to give yourself a little extra time in the morning to eat. Alternatively, have quick, healthy items on hand at home and at work like a scrambled egg wrapped in a whole wheat tortilla or a baggie of low fat granola, almonds and dried cranberries to munch on.

Wake Up Call

Some people eat breakfast but choose foods that are high in saturated fat, sugar, refined carbohydrates and calories but low in nutrition—donuts, Danishes and drive throughs fall into this category. Sometimes they eat more than they really need, like a large bagel or a stack of pancakes then feel sluggish afterward.

In some cases people say they don't eat breakfast but then they drink it instead. Read the nutrition analysis on Starbucks coffee drinks sometime—very few nutrients but loads of empty calories. Often these kinds of food and drinks don't "last" very long so you'll feel hungry again soon. Even juice can have that effect.

For me, breakfast is a convenient time to eat nutrient dense foods like bran cereal, low fat or skim milk, whole grain toast, peanut butter, hard boiled eggs, yogurt or fresh fruit. These are "vehicle foods" because they carry a lot of nutrients in a small package. Check out our easy Fruit and Yogurt Parfait and Fruit Smoothie recipes: <http://amihungry.com/wakeupcall.shtml>.



So is breakfast important? Now that's food for thought!

Wishing you optimal health and joy,
Michelle May, M.D.

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