



Breakfast and Your Health: A Review

by Warren Krug (May-August, 2005)

Realizing that the body is “a temple of the Holy Spirit,” (1 Cor. 6:19) and that it is a gift from God that ought to be treated with respect, the Christian will want be cognizant of ways to maintain a healthy lifestyle so long as good health is God's will.

There is no better way to maintain good health or to begin to regain it than to start the day off on the right foot with a healthy breakfast. With this in mind, we here offer a review of “Breakfast and Your Health,” an article in the February, 2005 issue of *Harvard Men's Health Watch* that is applicable for people of all ages and both genders.

Morning Metabolism

A person's metabolism maintains a fairly steady supply of energy whether food is in the system or not. This is good for the brain which can't store energy but depends instead on a constant infusion of glucose (sugar) from the bloodstream.

After a meal, food is digested and nutrients are absorbed into the bloodstream. Glucose that's not immediately needed is stored in the liver and muscles in the form of glycogen. Most energy reserves, however, are stored in the body's fat deposits.

When it's not getting new supplies of food, the body's metabolism goes into reverse. The liver converts glycogen back into glucose and produces other glucose to maintain steady bloodlevels.

A lapse of 10 to 12 hours without food (such as between dinner and breakfast the next morning) is enough for the metabolism to switch into this fasting, energy-mobilizing mode. So, it's important that the day's first meal will adequately put the body back into energy storage rather than energy usage.

Patterns, not perfection

While there is no such thing as a perfect meal, there is a dietary pattern that is best for health. A study of 51,529 men compared a “prudent pattern” (a diet consisting of a high consumption of whole grains, fruits, vegetables, legumes, fish, and poultry) with a “Western pattern” (a diet that included a high consumption of high-fat dairy products, refined grains, sweets, processed meat, red meat, and fried potatoes). No surprise: the men following a prudent diet had a much lower risk of heart disease and diabetes.

A diet should be prudent but need not be punitive or even boring. A good diet will include a variety of foods and experiment with new ones. It will keep fat consumption low to moderate (20%-30% of total daily calories) by reducing saturated fat from meat and dairy products and trans fatty acids from stick margarine, fried foods and snack items. The prudent diet will favor omega-3 fats from fish and nuts and monounsaturated fats from olive oil.

Simple sugars and other rapidly absorbed carbohydrates are to be kept to a minimum. But slowly absorbed complex carbohydrates should bring total carbohydrate intake to 50%-65% of one's daily calories. It is recommended that at least 25 grams of dietary fiber is consumed each day and protein should be about 15% of daily calories.

While breakfast may not seem like the ideal time to consume a lot of vegetables, beans, or fish, it may be the best time to get much of the day's need for complex carbohydrates and fiber.

Cereal: The heart of the matter

Cereal is a key to a healthy breakfast, but unfortunately, most cereals are made from refined grains and contain a lot of extra sugar. Ignore claims on cereal boxes of extra vitamins, minerals, or even whole grains. Focus instead on a cereal's dietary fiber content. At least 6 grams of fiber should be a minimum (10-12 even better) and plan to get enough other fiber from fruits, vegetables, nuts, and seeds later to meet the target of 25-30 grams of fiber.



Dietary fiber comes in two forms: insoluble fiber, as from wheat bran, and soluble fiber, often from oats. However, take note: many popular dry oat cereals contain only a trace of the oat bran fiber. Insoluble fiber makes stools bulkier, softer and easier to pass. Thus, when consumed in adequate amounts, it is linked to a reduced risk of constipation, hemorrhoids, and hernias. Insoluble fiber might even offer protection against intestinal polyps and colon cancers.

Soluble fiber keeps blood sugar from rising too fast after a meal and helps reduce blood levels of LDL ("bad") cholesterol.

Dietary fiber also has been shown in studies to be linked to a reduced risk of heart disease and strokes. When a cereal is chosen, ideally it should have almost no fat (there go many of the granola-based brands), less than 10 grams of sugar per serving, high potassium if possible, whole grains which provide selenium (to protect against prostate cancer), and folic acid (for protection against heart attacks, strokes, and even dementia).

Making a high-fiber breakfast more appealing and even more beneficial is easy by adding a fruit to it such as bananas, berries, or even apple slices. Starting the new routine with 2% milk and gradually shifting to 1% or nonfat milk will be an additional bonus.

Beverages

Milk (preferably low fat or nonfat) on your cereal or in a glass is fine. Citrus fruits and juices will add vitamin C and other nutrients. Coffee, tea, and caffeinated beverages are all okay as long as they do not cause any unpleasant side effects.

Other grains

For toast or bread, choose whole wheat or pumpernickel which have a low glycemic index. Choose a bran muffin low in fat and high in fiber, if you can find one. Bagels are low in fat, unless covered in cream cheese) but also low in fiber. These foods are okay unless they displace the cereal.



Spreads

Avoid butter (saturated fat) and stick margarine (trans fat). Honey and ham have no fat but are too sugary for daily use. Soft tub margarine is acceptable, but the newer plant stanol margarines such as Benecol and Take Control are best because regular use can help lower LDL cholesterol levels.

Fruit

Consume two to four portions a day; breakfast is an ideal time for at least one. There are no bad choices among the fruits.

Eggs

Admittedly there are still conflicting reports about the nutritional value or danger of eggs.

An average egg contains 213 mg of cholesterol and 5 grams of fat, almost all in the yolk, which contribute to the total consumed even though dietary cholesterol won't raise blood cholesterol levels nearly as fast as saturated fats.



The American Heart Association recommends a daily consumption of just 300 mg or less of cholesterol, or 200 mg for people with high blood cholesterol. That has eliminated eggs for many health-conscious people. Fortunately there are egg substitute available that work as well as regular eggs for most uses.

The story doesn't end here though. A Harvard study a few years ago found a single egg a day didn't contribute to cardiovascular disease. However, more than one egg was linked to a twofold increase in cardiovascular risk among diabetic men.

Designer eggs which claim to be omega-3, organic, free-range, or vegetarian are adding to the confusion but are too new to be evaluated.

Not recommended

Doughnuts, croissants, waffles, fried potatoes, processed meats (including bacon, ham, and sausage) have too much fat and/or salt.

Breakfast and your belly

Skipping breakfast will not help you lose weight. A study of more than 16,000 adults found the leanest were those who had cereal for breakfast, the heaviest were breakfast skippers. Those who had meat or eggs for breakfast were in-between.

Another study of 2,831 young adults discovered those who ate breakfast regularly were only half as likely to become obese.

Start right

A good breakfast may not boost your mental skills, but it can help you lose weight, and the right breakfast will protect you against many potential ailments. Eat right most of the time, and you can “cheat” sometimes.

Keep in mind: a healthier servant of Christ can do more for the Lord. *LSI*