

The Breakfast Effect: Exploring the Role of Morning Nutrition on Adolescent Mental Health and

Academic Success

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Introduction

Imagine starting the day without fuel, your mind foggy, your energy low, and your focus scatter. For many adolescents, skipping breakfast is precisely that: beginning the day on empty. Far from being just another meal, breakfast lays the foundation for mental clarity, emotional well-being, and cognitive performance. However, for many people, skipping breakfast has become widespread due to busy schedules, dietary misconceptions, or social and economic barriers. What are the actual consequences of overlooking this essential start to the day? Can ensuring a high-quality breakfast positively influence adolescence, mental health, stress levels, and academic success? There's a multitude of global research from schools in Spain to data-driven studies in Korea that have shed light on the undeniable connection between breakfast consumption and adolescent well-being. Research shows that adolescents who regularly eat a nutritious breakfast report reduced stress, better health-related quality of life, and lower rates of depression.

Furthermore, they show enhanced cognitive abilities, such as memory and attention, directly translating to improved academic performance. Conversely, those who skip breakfast are at a greater risk of mental distress, poor nutrition, and, in extreme cases, higher rates of suicidal issues. These findings highlight breakfast's pivotal role in managing immediate psychological and physical health and as a tool for addressing other societal concerns, such as mental health, crisis, and educational challenges. However, it is not just the act of eating breakfast that matters. It is also the quality of the meal consumed. Research highlights that high-quality breakfasts, rich and essential nutrients like protein, fiber, and healthy fats, give the most significant benefits.

On the other hand, low-quality breakfasts, often high in sugar or processed ingredients, can worsen and speed up the process of long-term health issues, such as hormonal imbalances, metabolic disorders, and even mental fatigue. This distinction highlights the responsibility of educators, healthcare professionals, and policymakers in promoting healthy breakfast habits among young people, which will pave the way for a healthier and more focused world. This paper investigates the crucial role of breakfast in shaping adolescent mental health and academic success, specifically focusing on the importance of nutritional quality. Researching diverse, global studies in real-life involvement will show how breakfast consumption reduces mental health challenges, enhances educational outcomes, and serves as a foundation for the nurturing and growth of a healthier lifestyle in young people.

Mental Health

Breakfast is crucial in shaping adolescent mental health, affecting mood, cognitive function, and overall emotional well-being. Eating a nutritious breakfast can be a good factor against mental health problems by promoting better mood regulation and stress management. The positive effects of breakfast consumption on mental health are well documented in various studies conducted worldwide. One particularly influential study from Alicante, Spain, found that adolescents who consumed a high-quality breakfast reported lower levels of perceived stress and depression compared to their peers who either skipped breakfast or consumed low-quality meals. This shows the significant mental health benefits of not just eating breakfast but ensuring it is nutritionally balanced.

Breakfast provides essential nutrients that support brain function and hormone regulation, which are necessary for mood stabilization and cognitive function. Foods rich in protein, fiber, healthy fat, and essential vitamins help stabilize blood sugar levels, reducing certain feelings,

such as irritability and fatigue, which are usually associated with nutrient deficiencies or poor eating habits. For example, incorporating whole grains, fruits, and lean proteins into a morning meal can help adolescents feel more focused and emotionally stable throughout the day. In contrast, a breakfast high in sugar or processed ingredients can lead to blood sugar crashes, which contribute to mood swings, mental fatigue, and higher anxiety levels. On the other hand, skipping breakfast can worsen mental health issues. Adolescents who start their day without any nutritional intake often experience cognitive deficits, irritability, and increased stress levels. The brain requires glucose and essential nutrients to function properly after fasting overnight. Without breakfast, the body's stress hormone levels, particularly cortisol, may remain heightened, negatively impacting mood regulation and decision-making. Skipping breakfast has also been shown to be associated with long-term health issues, which include hormone imbalances and metabolic disorders, which further contribute to poor mental health outcomes.

Furthermore, research highlights the physiological benefits of regular breakfast consumption. Looking past immediate mood improvements, adolescents with a consistent and nutritious breakfast routine usually experience better self-regulation, problem-solving skills, and resilience throughout the day. Healthcare professionals and educators are crucial in promoting these habits by highlighting the link between nutrition and mental health and how they connect. Schools also play a vital role in ensuring students meet these requirements. They can support this by implementing breakfast programs that provide healthy, affordable meal options for students from diverse backgrounds. However, it is important to consider the limitations of the current research. Many studies I've researched rely on self-reported data and surveys that note single moments in time rather than long-term patterns. This alone shows the need for more extensive long-term research to understand the connection between breakfast consumption and adolescent

mental health in depth. Despite that, the existing evidence strongly supports the idea that an imbalanced morning meal can be an important factor in improving adolescents' mental health and well-being.(Ferrer-Cascales, Sánchez-SanSegundo, Ruiz-Robledillo, Albaladejo-Blázquez, Laguna-Pérez, & Zaragoza-Martí, YEAR)

Educational Outcomes

In addition to its mental health benefits, breakfast is essential for academic success. Cognitive functions like memory, attention, problem-solving, and information processing are directly influenced by the nutrients consumed in the morning. Adolescents who regularly eat a nutritious breakfast show enhanced cognitive abilities, better classroom engagement, and improved academic outcomes compared to those who skip breakfast. The connection between breakfast consumption and academic performance is supported by extensive research conducted in various countries, including Spain, Norway, and the United States. One notable study conducted in Alicante, Spain, found that adolescents who ate high-quality breakfasts rich in protein, healthy fats, and complex carbohydrates performed better on cognitive tests assessing memory, attention, and problem-solving skills (Cascales, Sanchez-SanSegundo, Ruiz-Robledillo, Albaladejo-Blazquez, Laguna-Perez, Zaragoza-Marti). These students also reported feeling more focused and less mentally fatigued throughout the school day. In contrast, those who skipped or consumed low-quality breakfasts, such as sugary cereals or processed snacks, showed worse cognitive performance and more difficulty maintaining attention during lessons.

The U.S. school breakfast program further demonstrates the positive impact of breakfast on academic achievement. This program provides free or reduced-cost breakfast to students in public schools, ensuring they start their day with a nutritious meal. Studies have consistently shown that students who participate in the program exhibit better attendance rates, reduced

tardiness, and improved academic performance (Bartfeld, Kim, Ryu, Ahn). These students are more likely to stay engaged in classroom activities, complete assignments on time, and perform well on standardized tests. Furthermore, they report feeling less stressed and more energized throughout the school day, which directly contributes to their ability to learn and retain information (Bartfeld, Kim, Ryu, Ahn). The benefits of breakfast consumption go far beyond immediate cognitive gains. Regularly eating a nutritious breakfast helps establish long-term healthy eating habits that support sustained academic success. Adolescents who develop these habits are more likely to maintain balanced diets throughout their lives, contributing to better physical and cognitive health.

Another important aspect of breakfast and academic success is its role in stabilizing energy levels throughout the day. When students eat a balanced breakfast, their bodies receive a steady supply of glucose, which is the brain's main source of energy. This can assist with preventing sudden drops in blood sugar that can lead to fatigue, irritability, and difficulty concentrating. In contrast, adolescents who skip breakfast often experience mid morning energy crashes, which makes it harder to focus on lessons and retain information. A nutritious breakfast that includes a combination of protein, fiber, and healthy fats keeps students full for longer, reducing the likelihood of distractions caused by hunger. Additionally eating breakfast encourages better hydration, as many breakfast foods like fruits, dairy products, and whole grains, contain water which helps maintain proper brain function. When students are well nourished and hydrated, they are more likely to participate in class decisions, complete assignments efficiently, stay motivated throughout the day, and participate in class activities. Schools that promote breakfast programs and encourage healthy eating habits help create an environment where students can reach their full academic potential.

Foundation for Nurturing Healthier Lifestyle

On the other hand, skipping or consuming unhealthy breakfast can start a negative path, leading to poor dietary problems and health issues that may hinder academic and personal growth. More people should know about socioeconomic factors and how they influence specific breakfast consumption patterns. A study that the University of Oslo conducted found that certain demographic groups, such as immigrant students and adolescent girls, were more likely to skip breakfast due to factors such as time constraints, cultural dietary practices, and body image concerns. These findings show that targeted interventions are necessary because ensuring that all students have access to healthy breakfast options should be a priority (Lien). Schools, community organizations, and policymakers must work together to address these barriers and promote equitable access to nutritious meals for all adolescents. Despite the promising evidence, current research on breakfast and academic success has limitations. Many studies rely on self-reported data and cross-sectional designs, which do not capture long-term effects. More long-term research is needed to fully understand the impact of breakfast consumption on academic outcomes over time.

Furthermore, beyond individual dietary habits, broader, systematic issues contribute to breakfast consumption imbalances among adolescence. There are many factors such as economic constraints, which often limit access to healthy breakfast options, particularly for students from low income households. While school breakfast programs aim to bridge this gap participation remains inconsistent due to stigma, lack of awareness or certain challenges such as transportation in early school start times. Addressing these problems requires creative solutions such as universal free breakfast programs, grab and go meal options, and culturally inclusive menus that allow for diverse dietary preferences. By implementing these things, schools and policy makers

can create an environment, where all students, regardless of background, have the opportunity to start their day with a nutritious meal.

Moreover, the relationship between breakfast and cognitive performance shows the importance of fostering healthy morning routines beyond just doing it in school. Parents and guardians play a crucial role in shaping children's eating habits, community initiatives can provide education and resources to encourage consistent breakfast consumption at home. Public health campaigns that emphasize the benefits of a balanced breakfast, and partnerships between schools and local businesses to improve food accessibility, further reinforce positive dietary habits. As scientists continue to do research to evolve, a more complete approach that desegregates education, policy, and community support is essential for ensuring that all adolescents receive the nourishment needed for academic and personal success.

Activity During Breakfast Consumption

One may think that where a meal is consumed does not impact their cognitive function or mental health throughout the day but they would be wrong in this assumption. Where a person, particularly an adolescent, has breakfast and what they do while eating this means has a relatable influence on their academic performance and behavior. It has already been made clear that eating breakfast, especially a healthy one, is linked to better focus, problem solving, and academic achievement, while skipping breakfast can lead to lower motivation and poorer academic performance as shown in the article "The effects of breakfast on behavior and academic performance in children and adolescents" (Adolphus, Lawton, and Dye 12-13). More importantly, encouraging a focused breakfast experience can lead to better school engagement and positive relationship building with food. More to the point, screen time before school

exhausts attention span, making them less able to acquire knowledge and learn for the rest of their school day (Adolphus, Lawton, and Dye 12-13).

For instance, if an adolescent is always running late for school and they just grab something quick as they walk out the door to consume while driving to school or when they get to homeroom, depending on what it is they grab to eat, it could be negatively affecting their academic ability throughout the day. Alternatively, say a group of teens decide to eat breakfast at school every morning. They get their breakfast and get comfortable at their table. Once they're situated they all take out their respective devices, iPhone and iPad, laptop and headphones. Then, they spend the entire meal immersed within their own individual "world" not truly engaging with their friends at all. Research leads to the belief that eating without distraction in a social setting helps adolescents build the social skills required to build confidence and genuine friendships critical to their experience as teenagers (Glazer). Therefore, it is valid to say that what a child or adolescent does while eating is important.

It matters if a kid scrolls on an iPad or watches TV while eating breakfast, as research suggests that screen time during meals can disrupt hunger cues, lead to overeating, and negatively impact digestion and overall healthy eating habits. Disrupted hunger and fullness cues are crucial to helping children avoid overeating and weight gain (Herman). Screen distraction while eating causes adolescents to ignore their body's signals of hunger and fullness ultimately leading to negative eating habits. Shockingly, something most people, especially adolescents are unaware of, is that focusing on a screen rather than food can hinder the body's ability to properly digest and absorb nutrients. This is due to the fact that digestion is aided by noticing the aromas, preparation, and sight of food (Herman).

Conclusion

Nevertheless, the existing body of evidence heavily supports the critical role of breakfast in fostering cognitive development and academic achievement. In conclusion, ensuring adolescents have access to high-quality breakfast is essential for academic success. Parents, educators, and policymakers must advocate for better dietary habits and support school-based breakfast programs to create an environment that's good for learning and growth. By prioritizing nutritious morning meals, we can help adolescents reach their full academic potential and build a foundation for success.

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