

Breakfast

Evidence suggests that it's not just about having breakfast, it's about having a healthy breakfast. This Food Fact Sheet explains why breakfast is an important meal and suggests ways of putting together a healthy one – even when you're in a hurry.

A healthy breakfast

Breakfast literally means 'breaking the fast' as you have had no food or 'fasted' since the day before. Breakfast helps top up the energy stores you have used up during the night whilst your body repairs and renews itself. It also gives you mental and physical energy for your morning activities whether at work, school, home or out and about. Breakfast is said to be the most important meal of the day, yet up to one-third of us regularly miss this essential meal. Many of us are time pressured in the morning but with a little planning you can find a breakfast choice to suit your lifestyle.

Is breakfast really important?

Yes – apart from providing energy (calories) to kick start your day, a healthy breakfast provides essential goodness or 'nutrients' that the body needs such as fibre, vitamins and iron. Research has shown that people who eat breakfast have more balanced diets than those who skip it, are less likely to be overweight, lose weight more successfully if overweight and have reduced risk of certain diseases such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes.



Missing breakfast may result in snacking on less healthy foods later on in the morning without necessarily catching up on essential nutrients. Eating breakfast may also help to improve mental performance, concentration and mood – three more good reasons to eat something in the morning.

What makes a healthy breakfast?

Breakfast should provide about 20-25% of your daily nutritional requirements. Evidence suggests that it's not just about having any breakfast, it's about having a healthy breakfast.

Breakfast based on the main food groups below will give you an excellent start to the day:

- **Starchy foods such as bread, other cereals, rice, potatoes, and pasta** provide energy, B vitamins, some iron and fibre. Cereals are a really good choice, as well as being quick and easy to prepare, they often are fortified with vitamins, iron and calcium to contribute to your daily nutritional requirements. Porridge, bread, rolls, English muffins, scones, malt loaf, fruit bread, currant buns and bagels all provide good sources of energy, mainly as starchy carbohydrate, that will help kick start your metabolism and they're all low in fat too. Choose wholegrain varieties whenever possible to ensure a good fibre intake and try to avoid cereals coated in sugar.
- **Fruit and vegetables** are good sources of vitamins and fibre. Breakfast is a perfect time to boost your 5-a-day intake. Try chopped fresh fruit like a banana or some dried, stewed or canned (in juice not syrup) fruit on your cereal, half a grapefruit or fruit salad. A small glass (150ml) of pure fruit juice also counts as one serving of your 5-a-day. For something different, try a fresh fruit smoothie – fruit blended with low-fat yogurt or milk. Frozen berries, fruit in season or ripe fruit are all ideal for making smoothies. Mushrooms, baked beans or tomatoes on toast make a tasty change when you have a bit more time.

- **Milk and dairy foods** give you protein, calcium and B vitamins. Calcium is essential to keep your bones strong and healthy whatever your age and a serving of milk on your cereal can give you up to one third of your daily calcium needs. Use low-fat milks like skimmed, semi-skimmed or 1%. If you don't have cereal, try a glass of milk on its own or in a milkshake/smoothie, or have a pot of low-fat yoghurt instead. Natural yoghurt is delicious topped with fruit and a sprinkle of muesli. If you use milk and other products not made from cow's milk such as soya or rice, make sure they are unsweetened and fortified with calcium.
- **Meat, fish, eggs, beans and other non-dairy sources of protein** give you protein, iron and vitamins. These foods are not essential at breakfast but can add variety. Try not to have meat at breakfast every day and choose cooking methods such as grilling or poaching instead of frying in fat. Poached, boiled or scrambled eggs, baked beans or grilled kippers or smoked haddock are healthier options than bacon and sausages which are high in saturated fat.
- **Foods and drinks high in fat and sugar** give you energy but are generally low in vitamins, minerals and other nutrients. Limit these foods and choose low fat sunflower, olive or vegetable oil based spreads where possible and spread thinly. Choose low sugar, wholegrain breakfast cereals instead of sugar-coated, refined varieties. Avoid fizzy drinks, biscuits and crisps at breakfast and use fruit to add natural sweetness instead of sugar on your cereal.

Remember to include a drink. Water, milk, pure fruit juice, tea and coffee all supply vital fluids. Use low-fat milks and ask for 'skinny' coffee when out and about. Being well hydrated also helps you to concentrate better.

If you can't face eating first thing try to eat within two hours of getting up. Keep some healthy wholegrain cereal at work or if you are breakfasting on the go, choose somewhere that has healthy choices like wholegrain toast or cereal, porridge, low-fat yoghurts, pure fruit juices, fresh fruit salads

and smoothies with low-fat milk for hot drinks. Keep pastries and croissants as an occasional treat as they are high in fat and calories.

If you are in a hurry make sure you have things to hand you can grab like a banana, yoghurt with muesli, instant porridge or toast. Find out if your children's school has a breakfast club to make sure they have time to eat and have a healthy meal. Alternatively, lay the table buffet style (get the children to help/do the night before if necessary) and let the children serve themselves.

Here's an example meal plan for a quick and easy breakfast:

- Bowl of fortified wholegrain cereal with semi-skimmed/skimmed or 1% milk
- Fruit (fresh/tinned in juice/dried/frozen)
- Small glass of pure, unsweetened fruit juice
- Either, wholegrain/granary toast, wholegrain bread/rolls, wholegrain English muffins, malt loaf, fruit bread, currant bun or a bagel with poly/monounsaturated low-fat spread

Summary

Eat a healthy breakfast every day give you the best possible start. Planning ahead or grabbing something easy can help if you are short of time, but remember to include all of the four main food groups: starchy foods; fruit and vegetables; milk and dairy foods; and meat, fish, eggs and non-dairy sources of protein. Avoid food and drink that is high in fat and sugar as these are often low in vitamins, minerals and other nutrients. Remember to include a drink as being well hydrated helps you to concentrate.

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The information sources used to develop this fact sheet are available at www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts

© BDA February 2013. Review date February 2016. Version 2.

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