Breakfast Might Be A Marker For A Healthy Lifestyle, But Could it Prevent Obesity?

By Ruth Kava — December 2, 2017

Is breakfast really the most important meal of the day, and if you habitually skip it are you dooming yourself to obesity and worse? We don't think so, as we said in an article that points out most of the data on the topic come from epidemiological studies that show correlation, not causation. Yet research goes on, and we're keeping up with the latest, this time a study from Spain that examined the possible link between breakfast consumption and obesity — especially abdominal obesity, which is the type most closely associated with the risk of type 2 diabetes and other metabolic problems.

This epidemiological study included 1655 adults, about half each of men and women. About 53 percent were between 18 and 49 years of age, and the rest were between 41 and 64 years old. Two-thirds reported that they were habitually inactive ('active' meant that they performed at least 30 minutes per day of physical activity as part of their daily life, or at least 2 hours per week of structured physical exercise), and about one-third overall said they were current smokers. Participants' height, weight, and circumferences were measured during personal interviews, and food consumption was assessed by 3-day dietary records.

Only a small percentage of participants reported never eating breakfast — 3.6 percent overall, while 82 percent said they always ate breakfast and about 14 percent said they sometimes ate that meal. Dairy foods with cereals were the most frequently reported items consumed for breakfast. Men with Wt: Ht ratios > 0.05 (i.e., abdominal obesity) were more likely to be breakfast skippers than their slimmer counterparts, and there was an inverse significant statistical association between always eating breakfast and the odds of abdominal obesity.
Participants who ate breakfast 'sometimes' and 'always' were less likely to report that they smoked (43 and 33 percent respectively) compared to those who never ate breakfast (51 percent): this difference was statistically significant. Furthermore, those who skipped breakfast were also more likely to have other unhealthy characteristics such as physical inactivity.

Thus, the authors concluded:

"[T]here appears to be a greater likelihood of health-compromising behaviours in people who miss breakfast, including increased prevalence of smoking, poorer food choices and greater energy intake from snacks."

What does all this signify? Probably not that regularly eating breakfast will protect one against obesity. Rather, it may well be a marker for other health-promoting or health-decreasing choices a person might make. Further, the extent to which the eating patterns of Spanish adults are similar to those of other populations must be taken into account if one wants to generalize from this study.

And of course, like all epidemiological studies, this one presents correlations and not causation.

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