Does breakfast really play an important role in weight loss?

By ACSH Staff — August 25, 2014

Breakfast is often referred to as the most important meal of the day, with proponents of this meal arguing that consuming a healthy breakfast (whatever that means) is an important component of a sound weight-loss program. However, the majority of the studies finding a connection between breakfast and weight loss have been observational and therefore unable to determine whether in fact there is a causal effect of breakfast consumption on weight loss. According to a randomized controlled trial published in *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, there is actually no causal effect.

Researchers led by Emily J. Dhurandhar, assistant professor at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, randomly assigned 300 individuals ages 20 to 65 years who were trying to lose weight to one of three groups; one group was told to skip breakfast, another was told to always eat the meal and the last was told to continue with their current habits. After sixteen weeks, participants were weighed again and it was found that none of the subjects in any treatment group had lost much weight, and to which treatment group one belonged was not significant in terms of weight loss.

One might question the relationship of consuming extra calories in the form of breakfast and weight loss. Well, a second study conducted by researchers at the UK’s University of Bath led by James Betts, randomly assigned 33 participants to either skip or eat breakfast and then monitored their activity using activity monitors over a period of six weeks. After six weeks, researchers reported that measures of blood sugar, body weight and cholesterol were the same as when measured at the beginning of the study. The only difference found was that those in the breakfast group moved around more in the morning, amounting to an extra 500 calories burned throughout the day, more or less balancing out the extra breakfast calories. And those in the group who skipped breakfast did not in turn consume extra calories throughout the day.

In conclusion, Dhurandhar says, Breakfast may be just another meal. But Betts says more research is needed. It’s not yet clear, for instance, whether heavy people’s bodies respond differently to morning meals than lean people’s, or if the timing and makeup of breakfast matters.
ACSH's Ariel Savransky adds, There are so many messages that consumers receive surrounding the breakfast controversy. This study supports the idea that it's all about calories-in versus calories-out and those who do not consume breakfast do not have to change their daily habits to be successful at losing weight. The key is to consume a well-balanced diet no matter when you choose to have your meals.

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