Breakfast Skippers: Skip Without Concern

By ACSH Staff — May 23, 2016

We've all heard many times that "breakfast is the most important meal of the day." And those of us who just don't want to eat before noon despair at the damage we're supposedly doing to our health. But fear not, help is on the way in the form of a review article in The New York Times by Dr. Aaron E. Carroll, professor of pediatrics at Indiana University School of Medicine.

One by one, Dr. Carroll takes on the supposed links between eating breakfast and positive health outcomes, and points out their important weaknesses.

For example, the supposed link between skipping breakfast and obesity — is just a correlation, there's no causal connection. As we've noted numerous times in the past, observational studies — even prospective ones — can not show causality. And a randomized, controlled trial showed no effect of eating or skipping breakfast on body weight changes for overweight and obese individuals.

Another example, cited by Dr. Carroll is the supposed link between breakfast skipping and a higher risk of coronary heart disease. Again, an association, not a causal relationship.

And as for children, the data indicating that eating breakfast improves their learning is likely flawed as well — because children who don't usually get enough to eat will obviously do better when they're well-nourished. That doesn't mean, as Dr. Carroll points out, that well-nourished kids will benefit from being forced to eat breakfast if they don't want it.

The upshot is that if you want to eat breakfast, go for it. If not, don't bother out of some misguided belief that it's more important than lunch or dinner. But what's more important than the breakfast issue is the paucity of good nutrition research. We don't really need more questionable studies that lead to iffy truisms about what is and isn't the "correct" way to eat.