SUBURBAN NEWS

What actually happens when you don't eat breakfast?

BY CAROLYN MOLYNEAUX
Special Sections Editor

Breakfast guru Susan Holmberg comes to that status by way of a "dysfunctional" breaking-the-fast past.

Now, with the confidence not only of the nutritionist she is but as a person who reaps the benefits of practicing what she preaches, she can rattle off all the reasons to eat a good breakfast – reasons both scientific and physiological.


Susan Holmberg

While most people are aware that the nutritionist and doctor preach the have-a-good-breakfast sermon, that alone does not seem to affect committed "skippers" or non-breakfast eaters. Perhaps being aware of the physiological basis of what happens when nothing is eaten after a night's sleep or when the wrong kinds of foods are eaten, could weaken that "I do not eat breakfast" resolve.

The first fact to accept is that if you don't eat breakfast, you will eat more, especially later in the day. Just check with a "skipper" late in the afternoon when they get a severe case of the "munchies." They think, "Wow, it's a good thing I didn't eat any breakfast or I would really be overloading."

"The truth is," Holmberg says, "that the lack of food earlier served as a catalyst for an out-of-control craving later on." The prolonging of the fast sets off a reaction when the person finally does begin to eat. A metabollic regulating protein called Neuropeptide Y is released into the system. This protein creates a powerful chemical signal in the body that the kitchen is open, it's time to eat, time to chew-swallow consume. "It's as if the body is trying to make up for lost time," says Holmberg. In particular, the signal stokes the desire to get every carbohydrate within walking distance into the body.

The guy with the empty stomach all morning winds up burning 200 calories less, on the average, than if he had eaten a reasonable breakfast (Parenthetically, those fewer burned calories translate into about a 20-pound a year weight gain, Holmberg says).

Let's start the day again. This time the choice for breakfast is a no-fiber-carbs-only meal. How will this person's day go? Shortly after eating, he or she will have a blood sugar crash. The drop in sugar level stimulates hunger and the desire for more carbs, and so the cycle continues. "Sugar and no-fiber carbs seem to act as appetite control deregulators," Holmberg says.

Back to the top o' the morning and a breakfast containing proteins, fats and high-fiber carbs: This type of breakfast provides the fuel that will level out the blood sugar and thus avoid the crash that would begin the vicious cycle of carbs, crash, carbs — carbs meaning no-fiber carbs, of course.

Eating a breakfast of foods containing protein and fat has other advantages, Holmberg says. For one thing it prompts the endocrine system to start secreting cholesystokinin, commonly referred to as CCK, which tells the brain that you are full, sated, you don't have to eat anymore, you're finished. On the other hand, eat only no fiber-sugary carbs, no CCK will appear to signal the end of the meal.

And yet there is more favorable news. The good brain chemistry that eating protein and fats produce increases the ability to focus, to feel awake and "rarin' to go." Not so when eating refined carbohydrates, which leads to sleepiness and a long, slow slog through the afternoon.

But there are even more reasons for good breakfast-eating habits. Holmberg says that when a person doesn't eat, the body perceives itself to be in a stressful situation. The body responds to stressors the way it always does, with either "a fight or flight response." It uses cortisol, a hormone manufactured by the adrenal cortex, to mobilize blood sugar for fuel. One of the main sources of cortisol is muscle tissue which, once used, does not grow back.

And even worse, says Holmberg, "We believe if you do not eat, the body tries to turn down the thermostat so you don't cannibalize yourself." Holmberg admits it's a somewhat startling way to describe what happens, but well-known endricrinologist, Diana Schwarzbein, M.D, backs up every word. She says, "If you think you're not eating breakfast, you delude yourself because you are dining on yourself." At the same time, you're lulled into thinking you're O.K. because


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when you're flying on cortisol, you're not hungry; you feel just fine.

In the United States, traditional breakfasts are laden with carbohydrates – doughnuts, bagels, toast, cereal, waffles, pancakes. Of course it is not unheard of to eat a breakfast of eggs and bacon or sausage, but generally speaking, carbs rule the morning. On the other hand, much of the world eats proteins, fats and veggies for breakfast although trends have been noted that the rest of the world is beginning to more closely reflect American habits. As that happens, health issues also mirror those in the United States, which, among other things, means a greater incidence of diabetes and heart disease.

Overall, however, in Israel, people often breakfast on eggs and salads. Cheese and meat are common in Scandinavian countries, while in Hungary the fare is sandwiches, sausage and biscuits.

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