Brain scans suggest downside to skipping breakfast

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Small study found fasting prompts people to seek out high-calorie foods.

(HealthDay)—People who skip breakfast may end up eating more and making less healthy food choices throughout the day, according to a new study. Eating breakfast, on the other hand, helps people avoid overeating and cravings for high-calorie foods.

The findings are scheduled for presentation Wednesday at the Society for Neuroscience annual meeting in New Orleans.

Researchers compared MRI brain scans of 21 people. Scans were conducted both when the participants had not eaten anything that morning and after they had a 750-calorie breakfast. After all of the scans, the participants were served lunch.

"Through both the participants' MRI results and observations of how much they ate at lunch, we found ample evidence that fasting made people hungrier, and increased the appeal of high-calorie foods and the amount people ate," Dr. Tony Goldstone, at the MRC Clinical Science Centre at London's Imperial College, said in a society news release.

The study revealed that the people who skipped breakfast had a variation in the pattern of activity in their orbitofrontal cortex, an area of the brain linked to the reward value and pleasantness of food.

Specifically, pictures of high-calorie foods triggered activity in this area of their brain. The study authors noted, however, that if the participant ate breakfast, this response was not as strong.

The researchers concluded that fasting is not a good dieting strategy because it may cause the brain to seek out high-calorie foods.

Because this study was presented at a medical meeting, the data and conclusions should be viewed as preliminary until published in a peer-reviewed journal.

More information:
The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has more about nutrition.