

Secondary school pupils are skipping breakfast, with consequences for their health and learning

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

I taught teenagers economics for almost 40 years until my retirement a few years ago. When I started teaching in the 1970s, I used to refer to the last period on a Friday afternoon as the "graveyard slot." It was hard to get any work out of the students, who just wanted to go home for the

weekend.

By the time I retired, things had changed. There were now five "graveyard slots" on the weekly timetable. They occurred daily, and all were the period before the mid-morning break. By this time, many pupils were hungry—and challenging to teach.

After my teaching career, I began a Ph.D. I conducted a study of the [breakfast habits](#) of secondary school pupils in Northern Ireland. I found that a significant proportion of pupils were not eating an adequate breakfast—and that there was a link between a lack of sleep and skipping breakfast.

Going without breakfast

My research was carried out during the summer term in 2021 and included almost 2,500 pupils from 18 [secondary schools](#) in Northern Ireland. The pupils varied in age from 11 to 16 years. I found that one in three pupils had nothing to eat or drink (other than water) before leaving home for school.

But because some pupils have breakfast during their journey to school, and others eat breakfast on arrival at school, it would be unreasonable to define any pupil who left home without eating breakfast as a "breakfast skipper." With this in mind, I defined a breakfast skipper as any [pupil](#) who did not consume at least 400 calories within four hours of getting up. This even allowed food at the mid-morning break to be counted as a late breakfast.

The NHS recommends that teenagers consume between 2,000 and around 3,000 calories a day (depending on age and gender), with about [400 calories](#) for breakfast. There can be little doubt that fewer than 400 calories within four hours of waking is insufficient.

I found that 54% of pupils in my sample were having less than 400 calories within four hours of waking. In the case of girls in years nine to 11 (ages 13 to 16), the figure rose to 65%.

Breakfast helps to [stave off hunger](#) and reduces snacking on less healthy foods later in the day. Breakfast helps get the day off to a good start by providing some of the energy and nutrients the body needs for [good health](#)—such as starchy carbohydrates, fiber, B vitamins, calcium and iron.

The benefits of breakfast are not just limited to health. [A recent study](#) showed that habitual school-day breakfast consumption among adolescents is linked with better GCSE results, including in English and maths.

Not getting enough sleep

In addition to their breakfast habits, the students in my survey gave information about their usual bedtime and time of rising the following morning.

The average time between going to bed and getting up the following day was 8 hours 35 minutes, with only 30 minutes difference between the average for year seven and eight pupils (11 to 13 year olds) and year nine to 11 pupils (13 to 16 year olds).

Just 10% of the pupils who spent fewer than eight hours in bed had consumed at least 400 calories at home before leaving for school, and only one-third had consumed at least 400 calories within four hours of rising. When pupils spent more than nine hours a night in bed, these numbers rose. I found that 17% had at least 400 calories before heading off to school and 64% by four hours after getting up. This suggests a link between sleep and breakfast habits.

Of course, the best solution would be to persuade teenagers to go to bed earlier, spend more time in bed, and eat a hearty breakfast before leaving for school. However, a second best—and more realistic—solution is to accept that little can be done about bedtime, and serve the children a nutritious "grab-and-go" breakfast on arrival at [school](#).

The [Food and Research Action Center](#) in Washington DC has conducted a lot of research on this topic. Their research shows that [breakfast](#) in the classroom results in increased standardized test scores, concentration, and fosters a sense of community.

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