

Eating an unhealthy breakfast could have a similar effect on your child's school day as having nothing at all

April 16 2024, by Andrew J. Martin, Emma Burns, Joel Pearson, Keiko C.P. Bostwick and Roger Kennett



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Many parents know [it is important](#) for their teenagers to have breakfast before they go to school. Even though young people can be reluctant to eat it, breakfast [provides the energy](#) the brain and body need to function through the day.

In our [new research](#) we looked at what impact breakfast has on students' motivation to learn and their [academic achievement](#) at school.

We also looked at whether it matters if they have a healthy breakfast, an unhealthy breakfast or no breakfast at all.

Why did we study breakfast?

As educational psychology researchers we look at ways to improve how students learn.

Unlike factors beyond a student's control (such as teaching quality) or those that can take time to improve (such as study skills), eating breakfast is something students may have some immediate control over.

It is also something that could be quickly addressed by schools.

Our research

We wanted to know if eating breakfast affects students' motivation and achievement. We also wanted to know if it mattered whether the breakfast was a healthy one.

So, as part of an Australian Research Council project, we studied 648 Australian high school students from five [private schools](#) in New South

Wales. Two of these schools were single-sex boys' schools, two were single-sex girls' schools and one was co-educational.

Students were in Years 7 to 9, with an average age of 13–14 years.

We conducted our study during students' [science](#) lessons. It was made up of three main components.

First, students completed an online survey of their breakfast habits. We asked if they had eaten breakfast that morning and what types of food they usually eat for breakfast.

Drawing on [national dietary guidelines](#), we created a score for how often students consumed healthy foods for breakfast, such as fruit and vegetables, dairy and protein, wholegrains and cereals and water. We also asked how often they had an unhealthy breakfast, with items such as sugary soft drinks, processed meat, [fast food](#), unhealthy bakery goods and unhealthy snacks. A higher score reflected typically eating a healthier breakfast.

Second, they rated their motivation in science lessons, including how confident they were in doing science schoolwork, how much they valued the subject and were focused on learning.

Third, students did a test based on content in the NSW science syllabus.

In this way, our study was a snapshot of one day in the life of students.

We also asked questions about their personal background, how well they usually perform in science, and also features of the classroom (including the time of the lesson in the day) so we could account for these in our findings.

Our findings

We found students who ate a healthy breakfast on the morning of the study demonstrated higher levels of motivation and achievement.

This means, for example, they were more confident about and focused on their science lessons. And they scored higher results in the test of their science knowledge.

In comparison, students who ate no breakfast had lower levels of motivation and achievement.

This was not unexpected. But what did surprise us was students who had no breakfast had similarly low levels of motivation and achievement to those students who had an unhealthy breakfast.

This suggests eating an unhealthy breakfast could be as disruptive to motivation and achievement as not eating breakfast at all.

Because we also looked at students' previous science results, the study showed that even if they had previously performed well in science, they could still score low in [motivation](#) and achievement if they had not had breakfast or had eaten an unhealthy one.

Although our study could not dig into specific reasons for this, it is likely because eating the wrong kinds of foods does not properly fuel the mind or body for what is needed to optimally "switch on" academically.

It is also important to note the students in our study were from private schools. Although we took a student's family background into account, the socioeconomic aspect of eating breakfast requires further investigation. It could be that the benefits of a healthy breakfast are larger in a more diverse sample of students.

What does this mean?

Our findings emphasize the importance of students eating a healthy breakfast each and every morning.

Schools can help ensure this by

- offering a healthy breakfast to students
- offering a healthy morning snack
- teaching students about the importance of a healthy breakfast (for example, as part of health and well-being syllabus units)
- giving parents information about the importance of healthy breakfasts, meal ideas and strategies for giving this to their children.

Barriers to breakfast

But schools will need to be mindful of and address barriers to a healthy breakfast. For example, there will be situations where school-provided breakfasts and morning snacks will need to be free. In such cases, it is also possible some students may not want a free breakfast if there is a stigma attached to it (if it is seen as only being for kids from disadvantaged backgrounds).

It is also worth recognizing some students may have body image concerns and not want to eat a snack or breakfast at school. In addition, cultural and dietary differences may mean some foods are not appropriate for some students.

If these barriers are effectively managed, our study shows a small and relatively achievable change in a student's life—a healthy [breakfast](#) each day—can have a positive academic impact.

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