

How a bad breakfast makes you fat

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Does this sound like anyone you know?

He - or she - has a muffin or doughnut in the morning or skips breakfast entirely. Lunch might be a sandwich or yogurt on the run. By around 4 o'clock, he's ravenous and hits the vending machine or snacks on whatever cookies or candy are sitting around the office.

Once he gets home, he'll devour the children's leftovers and keep grazing until bedtime. Or he'll head out for drinks and a big dinner with friends or clients, demolishing the bar nuts and the breadbasket along the way.

Stephen Gullo, a New York psychologist and diet counselor, calls this the "Wall Street Eating Syndrome," because it sums up the eating habits of so many of his time-pressed patients in the financial industry. But variations of it apply to millions of other Americans - and it's a prime recipe for gaining weight.

Amid the sea of contradictory diet advice, there is an emerging consensus that skimping on meals early in the day sets people up for compulsive snacking later - and that this cycle goes a long way toward explaining why Americans are becoming steadily more obese.

A key reason that most French women don't get fat, writes Mireille Guiliano, in her best-selling book of the same name, is that they eat balanced meals throughout the day and don't snack.

Skipping breakfast, says Arthur Agatston, a cardiologist and author of "The South Beach Diet," "allows blood sugar to drop and hunger to increase over the course of the morning, resulting in powerful cravings for a lunch that includes carbs of questionable value - the very kind guaranteed to keep you overweight."

Of course, eating a good breakfast is hardly revolutionary advice. But many Americans haven't taken it to heart. The NPD Group, which has been tracking food trends for 25 years, says 12 percent of Americans regularly skip breakfast. Some people argue that eating breakfast makes them hungrier during the day. But that's likely because they are eating the wrong breakfast, which can be just as bad as skipping it.

Starting the day with a doughnut or sweetened cereal and orange juice - or other refined carbohydrates - can activate your appetite instead of controlling it, says Walter Futterweit, a specialist in diabetes and other endocrine disorders at the Mt. Sinai School of Medicine in New York City.

"You're getting a sudden burst of pure sugar, which causes an immediate release of insulin," prompting your blood sugar to drop. An hour or two later, you might start feeling edgy, irritable, have difficulty concentrating and you're driven to eat again. "It's a vicious cycle. It really disrupts the whole day," Futterweit says.

Indeed, Gullo says his high-powered patients weren't overeating because of a lack of willpower. "These people have extraordinary willpower," he says. The problem was, "They were fighting their own body chemistry."



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Besides being too busy to eat enough early in the day, victims of "Wall Street Eating Syndrome" inadvertently set themselves up for binge eating once they do start snacking in the late afternoon, Gullo writes in his book, "The Thin Commandments." If you go without food for more than three or four hours, and then eat simple carbohydrates such as cookies or pretzels, you spark a sudden rise in a natural body protein called neuropeptide Y.

It's like putting "a match to gasoline," he explains. "Instead of being satisfied, your appetite has actually been turbocharged, and instead of eating just one cookie, you end up eating the whole bag."

The best way to keep your blood sugar stable and your appetite under control, many nutritionists agree, is to fill up on protein for breakfast - ideally, an egg white omelet or nonfat yogurt. More lean protein and a salad or other vegetables for lunch will help keep you feeling full for hours.

A mid-afternoon snack with protein and fiber - think hard-boiled eggs, low-fat cheese or a low-fat, high-protein energy bar - will protect you from feeling like you need a high-carbohydrate fix around 4 o'clock.

By dinnertime, you should be less hungry, and content with more lean meat and a salad or vegetable. If you want a late-night snack, try crudities, sugar-free Jell-O or a low-calorie frozen pop. "The later you are eating, the lighter you should go on carbohydrates," Gullo says.

Many successful dieters say they have become new converts to the breakfast habit.

"I try to push myself to eat something like cottage cheese or an egg-white omelet," says one investment banker who recently lost 85 pounds, despite working long days on the trading floor surrounded by junk food and having frequent late dinners with clients. He also makes time to exercise, either at 5 a.m. before work, or at 11 p.m. afterward. "My wife thinks I'm nuts," he says. "But I'm pretty determined."

Eliminating temptations also helps. "Conference rooms are usually junk-food rooms - bring your own snack with you," says Gullo, who recommends packing individual servings of water-pack tuna, low-fat cheese and high-fiber bran crackers.

"We banned food in our office," says Nancy Shapiro, 57, who, with her sister, Joyce Segal, 59, lost a total of 95 pounds by eating breakfast for the first time, lean protein lunches and healthy snacks. The sisters are co-owners and co-presidents of Joyce Leslie Inc., a Moonachie, N.J., retail chain that sells junior-size clothing. "We fit into our own inventory now!" says Nancy.