Eating breakfast is considered to be an important part of a balanced diet and provides a great start to the day. Breakfast eaters generally have higher micronutrient intakes and tend to be less overweight than breakfast skippers. Children and adolescents who regularly eat breakfast also tend to have a lower body mass index than those who don’t, and have a reduced risk of becoming overweight or obese. Surveys, however, conclude that many children skip breakfast and, considering the fact that eating breakfast is thought to improve concentration and learning, the promotion of regularly eating breakfast, especially on school days should stay high on the agenda.

The reality of the morning rush when getting ready for work and school is all too familiar. It’s easy to understand how this can lead to breakfast skipping, possibly accounting for the statistic that 1 in 7 children in Ireland fail to eat breakfast every day. Skipping breakfast not only reduces nutrient intake it can also affect the ability to learn. Now that children are going back to school, it seems a great opportunity to set a routine and get into the breakfast habit from the start.

Children need an adequate intake of vitamins and minerals to support their slow and steady growth and studies in children suggest that breakfast eaters are more likely to meet their daily nutrient intake guidelines. A recent study examining the school-day diet of Irish primary school children found that relative to the overall school-day, food eaten “before school” was lower in saturated fat and sodium, and higher in dietary fibre and many micronutrients. Breakfast eaters tend to have higher intakes of essential vitamins and minerals, particularly when they choose cereal and milk for breakfast, as breakfast cereals are often fortified and milk boosts calcium intake.

The importance of eating breakfast to cognitive performance has been studied in some depth in healthy young adults with increasing interest in children and effects on performance...
and learning at school. The primary fuel for the brain is glucose and it is dependent upon a constant supply in the blood stream. When we wake up in the morning we have, in effect, had an ‘overnight fast’ and eating breakfast boosts the levels of glucose in the circulation. Glucose in itself may have a direct effect on cognitive performance and the exact mechanisms of action are not well established and need greater understanding.10

Increasingly, it is accepted that when children eat breakfast it can help improve their mental performance in areas such as problem solving,11 mathematical and creative tasks12 and attention span.13 This effect continues throughout the hours after breakfast, not just after breakfast has been consumed.14,15 The beneficial impact of breakfast consumption is likely to be even greater among children whose nutritional status is compromised.16 However, further research is needed to more fully understand the effect of breakfast in children and adolescents, and to recommend exactly what size and composition of breakfast is optimal for children’s cognitive function.

The importance of breakfast cannot be underestimated, and the evidence for its beneficial effect on overall wellbeing and improved memory is encouraging.18 Breakfast doesn’t have to be a complicated affair – quite the reverse in fact. A bowl of fortified breakfast cereal and milk, perhaps topped with a handful of fruit or with a glass of juice, is quick, tasty and nutritious and is the ideal choice for the whole family.

References


5 TOP TIPS TO HELP ENCOURAGE KIDS TO EAT BREAKFAST

1. Set the alarm 10 minutes earlier to give a little extra time to eat breakfast
2. Sit and eat breakfast together
3. Lay out the breakfast bowls, plates, cutlery and packets of breakfast cereals ready to sit down to eat when everyone is dressed and ready to go to work and school
4. Keep children looking forward to their breakfast by offering a variety of tastes over time. Offering a variety of cereal choices, or allowing children to mix their breakfast cereals will help to avoid flavour boredom setting in – buy a different kind of fortified breakfast cereal when next shopping
5. A portion of fruit with breakfast counts towards 1 of your 5-A-Day and the vitamin C found in fruit also helps with iron absorption