

Better Breakfasts *by Judith Aronson-Ramos, M.D.*

Breakfast time can be a challenge in many households. Weekday mornings for most families are hectic and rushed. Often there is little time to think about preparing and eating a nutritious breakfast. Convenience is usually the priority. However, numerous research studies have demonstrated that eating a balanced breakfast directly impacts school performance. The latest research emphasizes the importance of protein, not only in the morning, but also to sustain concentration throughout the school day.

Unfortunately, many common breakfast choices contain little or no protein, and often parents are struggling to get their children to eat anything let alone a balanced meal. Children, especially those who watch a lot of television, have been exposed to commercial messages encouraging them to choose sugary nutrition depleted products. Groups that monitor children's television viewing have noted that advertising for high sugar cereals and breakfast products out number all other products.

Here are some practical suggestions to make breakfast easier and more nutritious along with a few recipe ideas:

1. Name what you eat. Kids love to call things by their own creative names and enjoy the process of thinking them up. Design your own unique family favorites. ("Cheese Toast", "Banana Boats", "Magical Muffins" etc.)
2. Prepare in advance. Keep a supply of hard boiled eggs, cheese, nuts and whole grain waffles and breads that can be combined into healthy breakfasts. Some cooked dishes can be prepared the night before and refrigerated or frozen for later use. Sunday is nice time to prepare for the week ahead.
3. Eat with your kids. Many parents are so frazzled themselves they are skipping meals. The same principles of nutrition apply to adults as children. To be more productive and focused in the workplace a breakfast containing a healthy serving of protein is preferable.
4. Don't restrict breakfast to traditional breakfast foods. If it is healthful it can be eaten. A turkey sandwich, grilled cheese, pizza with whole grain crust, or last night's dinner can be acceptable choices. Americans tend to eat their largest protein serving at night when it would be more beneficial to have it in the morning. There are also healthy frozen food choices that are quick and easy to prepare.
5. Breakfast meats that are rich in protein, should also be healthful. Avoid sausage and bacon unless made from turkey, or minimally processed without nitrates and preservatives. Alternative products are readily available at any health food store, and many traditional grocery stores now have small organic or "natural foods" sections, which can have many alternative choices. The taste test applies here and don't be discouraged if it takes a few tries to get the brand and product your kids will enjoy. Be persistent and keep trying.

Recipes

Terrific Toasts

Step 1 - Best Bread

Any good quality bread can be combined with many different foods to make a complete breakfast. Start with the healthiest bread your children will eat. If they don't like whole-wheat try variations - honey wheat, light wheat etc - sometimes they have a milder flavor. You can also try different grains and styles: rye, pumpernickel, spelt, and others have unique flavors and offer advantages over white bread. Even sourdough has more nutritional value than plain white bread. The rule of thumb here is the more whole grains in the bread the more nutritious. There are also many "low carb" breads that have substantial amounts of protein added to them and make a good choice.

Step 2 - Top it Off

There are numerous toppings that can make something as simple as toast a nutritious choice. If your child only wants "butter" choose an enhanced spread that has no trans fat and contains added nutrients such as omega fatty acids. There are numerous products available (smart balance spread, canoleo, etc.)

If you can add more variety try any of the following toppings: peanut butter, other nut butters (almond, walnut etc), farmers cheese or cottage cheese and jam, melted cheese (place bread with cheese on top in the toaster oven and broil for 1-2 minutes), yogurt, and Neufchatel cheese (very similar to cream cheese with less saturated fat). Make your own spreads by combining textures and flavors your children like.

You can also be creative with flavorful crunchy foods sprinkled on top: soy nuts, peanuts, sunflower seeds, dry cereals, crumbled turkey bacon, Parmesan cheese etc. Children especially enjoy it when they do the sprinkling themselves. Even sweet treats like mini M&Ms, or healthy alternates can be used sparingly to make it appealing.

Exciting Eggs

Start with purchasing a good quality egg. It is now possible to buy eggs from hens that are raised "cage free" and fed healthier grains in nearly any grocery store. There are also eggs that contain omega three fatty acids in the yolk, because the chickens are fed flax seeds. These "omega enriched" eggs are an excellent source of protein with the added benefit of omega three fatty acids. Remember that brown or white eggs have the same nutritional value.

Eggs can be prepared numerous ways quickly. They have been overlooked in recent years due to concerns about cholesterol. However, they are an excellent protein source for most children. Here are some preparation suggestions:

Traditional - fried, scrambled, or omelets. Omelets can contain so many different foods: vegetables, cheese, crumbled turkey bacon or sausage, cream cheese and lox; be creative and add what your child enjoys.

Deviled Eggs - hard boil the eggs and mix the yolk with mayonnaise and add spices and stuff back into the white. The yolk can also be mixed with plain yogurt, honey mustard, humus, tahini, or any condiment you think your children will like.

Frittatas - there are numerous basic recipes, this is similar to an omelet but prepared slightly differently. The egg and whatever you choose to add are whipped together then poured into a hot pan lightly greased with oil and covered. It is not flipped during cooking like a traditional omelet and has a very light fluffy texture.

French Toast - egg can be mixed with regular milk or soy milk and lightly fried. It can be topped with a variety of appealing sweets: syrup, cinnamon sugar, powdered sugar, mini chocolates or sprinkles, and other treats.

Cereals

There are many cereals that are nutritious and when combined with milk make a good breakfast. Whole grain cereals with reduced sugar are the best choices. Some common brands that still have appeal to children include: Kix, Cheerios, Total, various types of granola, Chex. When reading the labels look for whole grains, minimal sugar, and few additives. Hot cereals (oatmeal, cream of wheat) can be excellent choices, and you can try adding a teaspoon of protein powder for added nutritional benefit. Sweeten with honey, organic sugar, raw sugar, or black strap molasses. Black strap molasses is also an excellent source of calcium and iron.

Bread Products

Waffles, muffins and bagels are standard breakfast fare. Choose them wisely. Whole grains with fewer additives are always preferable. Homemade muffins can be prepared and frozen for easy use. This way you can add healthful ingredients: whole-wheat flour, wheat germ, nuts, and no additive. In buying any prepared food the smaller the list of ingredients the better. Learn to read labels. "Natural" does not always mean healthy. Be aware that ingredients are listed in order of the amount contained in the product. You can enhance the nutritional value by adding a protein rich spread to any of these products, or drinking a protein rich drink with them (milk, protein shake or smoothie, soy beverages). Remember these bread products contain little or no protein by themselves, however, combined with a protein source as described above they suitable for breakfast.

Out of the Bread Box Choices

Trail Mix - make your own with nuts, raisins, peanut butter filled pretzels, protein bars cut in cubes, sesame stick, healthy crackers, and other choices based on your children's likes and dislikes.

Fruit Salad with yogurt or cottage cheese.

Bars - protein bars, granola bars, breakfast bars; there are many choices. Read the labels carefully and choose products with at least 5-7grams of protein and less than 20 grams of sugar. Trans fat content should be zero and saturated fat less than 5 grams. If you purchase bars in a health food store or the health food section of your grocery store you will choose a more nutritious product.

Shakes/Smoothies - protein powder can be mixed with milk, or juice and fruit or yogurt to make a very nutritious drink. Try different combinations and add the protein powder slowly as it can dramatically affect the texture and taste.

For more information:

General Information:

The Family Nutrition Book, by William Sears, M.D. Dr. Sears also has a website www.askdrsears.com

Eating Well For Optimum Health, by Andrew Weil, M.D. Dr. Weil also has a website: www.drweil.com

Super Immunity for Kids, by Leo Galland, M.D. he also has a web site: www.mdheal.org

Cookbooks:

The Whole Foods Market Cookbook, by Steve Petusevsky

Cooking Rocks, by Rachel Ray. This cookbook has many kid friendly recipes some may need to be modified to increase their healthfulness.

Other helpful websites for information on nutrition and nutritional supplements:
www.consumerlab.com - annual subscription can be valuable as this organization evaluates many different food and vitamin supplements for quality and purity.

www.cspinet.org - web site of Center for Science in the Public Interest. This watch dog groups publishes Nutrition Action News which evaluates different foods available in grocery stores, fast food restaurants, and other popular eating establishments. They also review different topics in health and nutrition.