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TUCK IN: Is the notion of 'the most important meal of the day' simply a food myth created by breakfast product manufacturers? Picture: 123rf.com

Do we really need to have breakfast?

Experts on nutrition weigh in on this much-discussed issue and break down reasons for their positions

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I'm pretty sure we've heard them all before: Eating carrots helps you see at night, a glass of milk a day will make your bones strong and, arguably the most popular phrase of all, breakfast is the most important meal of the day.

But are any of these statements true?

An article which appeared on BBC Science Focus magazine explained that carrots contain vitamin A, or retinol, which is required by the body to synthesise rhodopsin, a pigment in the eyes that operates in low-light conditions. A vitamin A deficiency leads to nyctalopia, or night blindness.

What about the link between calcium and strong bones? Well, according to website WebMD, a large glass of fortified, low-fat milk may aid in warding off osteoporosis, a condition where bones become brittle and fragile, usually due to a calcium deficiency.

But what about breakfast? Do we really need it or is this a food myth created by our mothers in an effort to get us to eat more food?

Nutritionists from across South Africa are divided on the issue.

First to weigh in is Professor Tim Noakes, author and founder of the Noakes Foundation. According to him, a morning meal is not necessary at all but, if you find yourself peckish after waking, one should grab something high in protein and fat – the good fats, that is.

East London dietitian Tirsa Holtzhausen,

spokesperson for the Association for Dietetics South Africa (ADSA), was of a completely different opinion.

Holtzhausen said breakfast provides energy to perform essential functions within the body, as well as external activities too. She explained that depriving the body of this energy will result in the body tapping into its own fat stores for energy.

From North West University, nutritionist Professor Salome Kruger said it's difficult to select one meal as the most important.

"I believe one should consider each individual's setting and environment, according to age, body size and work output requirements. For children, breakfast is more important than for adults," she said.

Why? Well, for school-age children, even at pre-school age in an early childhood development setting, breakfast is vital as evidence shows that children who have breakfast perform better in cognitive tests than hungry children.

"Children have a smaller reserve and gastric capacity than adults and therefore they need to eat more frequently during the day, starting with breakfast" Kruger explained.

So is breakfast essential or not? You decide, but when choosing what to eat, these experts shared some tips.

Food guru Noakes, who has over the years been rather vocal about the negative effects of eating carbohydrates, said people should keep far away from breakfast cereals, high energy fruits like bananas and low fat dairy products.

"All these types of foods do is spike your

blood glucose levels and then you're hungry again three hours later and you have to eat again," he explained.

"If you want to open yourself up to obesity and diabetes, then eat cereal laden with sugar for breakfast. Stay away from any dairy product which is low fat. These tend to be low in fat but high in sugar. Once they take the fat out of the product then it tastes like cardboard so they have to add sugar to it to make it taste better."

With sugar so addictive, Noakes said keeping it in your diet just makes the body crave more and more of it over time. He estimated that 80% of South African products are laden with sugar.

"Sugar is the biggest contributor to obesity and diabetes in the country. I grew up in the 1960s when everybody was thin. Do you know why? Because nobody ate any sugar."

According to Holtzhausen, breakfast cereals could be the reason breakfast is seen in a negative light.

She said: "Breakfast's bad rap can possibly be related to the fact that many foods available for breakfast in our modern society have contributed to unhealthy dietary intakes and food choices, such as breakfast cereals.

"Commercial breakfast confectionery, and even yoghurt, are notoriously high in sugar and sodium, as well as refined starch in certain cases. These types of foods are typically associated with weight gain and the increasing trends of conditions such as insulin resistance, non-insulin dependent diabetes and heart-related conditions, which has made it difficult for consumers to choose

healthy breakfast foods."

Does skipping this meal have any effect on the body?

Kruger explained that after a long fast, the stomach is empty. This leads to fatty acids being released from the body's fat stores to provide energy for muscle function.

This is great for overweight people who are aiming to lose weight. Not so great in people who are not overweight, or children, as their bodies do not have so many reserves. All that happens is that the body starts to break down muscle tissue to maintain blood glucose levels.

"This can leave one tired and unable to concentrate," she said.

Holtzhausen said a healthy breakfast should include slow release carbohydrates such as low GI porridge, foods high in fibre such as fresh fruit plus protein, which can be found in either eggs or low sugar yoghurt.

"The key is to focus on including a variety of sources from each food group. Always aim to choose unprocessed foods as far as possible as most processed foods also contain higher levels of sugar and salt than unprocessed versions.

"Most importantly, plan your meals well, so as to ensure that moderate amounts of each food group are consumed regularly, on a daily and weekly basis; this will provide the variety of nutrients needed to fulfil the body's short- and long-term requirements," she added.

Noakes, who said usually no more than two meals a day are necessary, concluded: "For me, it's really not about when you eat, just what you eat."