

Nutrition News: Nutrition improves student success

By Dayle Hayes
NUTRITION NEWS

As a Gazette headline announced last week, it's "Test Time" in Montana and Wyoming schools. Students, parents, teachers and administrators anxiously hope this year's results will show appropriate progress in reading and math scores.

If schools and families hope for optimal academic performance, they must pay attention to health news as well as the latest developments in curriculum materials and teaching techniques. Health is an academic issue, but it is about more than the oft-repeated advice to eat a good breakfast on test day.

Let's deal with the breakfast issue first. It is no urban legend that eating breakfast improves performance for children and adults, especially on detailed tasks like math problems.

So yes, eating breakfast on the morning of standardized tests is a great idea, as is a good night's sleep. However, eating right for academic success goes well beyond breakfast on a few days of the school year. Here are the facts:

1. It takes nutrition to get information into your brain, not just to get it out on test days. A power-packed breakfast is important every day, not just the morning of an exam.
2. Breakfast helps with learning in the morning, but a well-balanced lunch is necessary for optimal brain function in the afternoon. And, dinner is important for homework in the evening.
3. Consistent and adequate levels of many nutrients, especially iron and zinc, are necessary for brain development and cognitive functioning. American kids, especially teenage girls, are not getting enough of these critical nutrients.

And, it isn't just nutrition that matters when it comes to academics. Having a healthy weight and overall fitness matter, too.

Sadly, the health of our children -- locally and across the United States -- fails to measure up when it comes to factors that affect well-being and school success.

Overweight kids

Children who are overweight have more school absences than those with a healthy weight. Missing school can affect academic success, ability to participate in sports and other important issues. Seriously overweight children report a lower quality of life, which can include harassment, discouragement and even discrimination at school, according to the National Education Association.

The prevalence of overweight among American children ages 6 to 11 has more than doubled in the past 20 years, going from 7 percent in 1980 to 16 percent in 2002. The rate of overweight among adolescents ages 12 to 19 has more than tripled during the same time period, increasing from 5 percent to 16 percent.

Unfortunately, Montana youth are not immune to these national trends. A recent pilot study in Missoula County schools found that 15.2 percent of students measured in three elementary schools had a body mass index in the overweight range. Another 15.5 percent had a BMI considered at risk of becoming overweight.

When it comes to physical activity, the statistics are equally bleak. Fewer and fewer of American kids meet the government guidelines that "(s)chool-age youth should participate daily in 60 minutes or more of moderate to vigorous physical activity that is developmentally appropriate, enjoyable and involves a variety of activities."

Although American kids are more active than adults, Center for Disease Control surveys indicate 48 percent of girls and 26 percent of boys do not get vigorous activity on a regular basis. Being sedentary can also affect performance in school. Research has shown a positive relationship between overall fitness levels and scores on standardized tests in math and reading.

School wellness

Making improvements in our children's health will obviously take changes by families. However, schools also have a vital role to play, and many benefits to gain, in making progress toward healthier kids. That's exactly why the U.S. Congress has mandated that any school receiving funds for Child Nutrition programs (breakfast, lunch and after-school snacks) must have a wellness policy by the first day of school this fall.

If you would like to know more about school wellness issues, and how you can get involved in your local wellness policy, check out the new resource published by National Cattlemen's Beef Association (and written by yours truly).

The new School Wellness Toolkit and many other materials are available for free download at: www.beefnutrition.org/matehealthschoolnutrition.aspx

Still wondering about what makes the best breakfast for test day? Watch this column or come to the BAFHK public forum.

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