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Intermittent fasting can aid in weight loss, anti-aging and overall health

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Intermittent fasting is an eating strategy that gained popularity as a weight loss technique about 10 years ago. In addition to reported weight loss benefits, research has shown intermittent fasting has an anti-aging effect and can improve markers of physical and mental health, according to Luke Corey, a registered dietitian with Mayo Clinic Sports Medicine and sports nutritionist with the Minnesota Timberwolves.

“Intermittent fasting is the umbrella term for a number of fasting protocols,” said Corey. “The general concept is to consume food during a specified window. Outside of that window, you eat very little or no food at all.”

There are three primary intermittent fasting protocols:

Whole day – fasting on some days, eating regularly on others. In the 5-2 protocol, eating occurs during five days throughout the week, with complete fasting or very low calorie consumption on two days during the week.

Alternate day – eat and fast every other day.

Time restricted – eat during the same window of time every day. The time-restricted protocol typically has a four-, six- or eight-hour feeding window. In the most common option, people fast for 16 hours and eat during an eight-hour window (usually either 8 a.m.-4 p.m. or noon-8 p.m.).

Weight management

During a fasting period, the body uses its own fat stores as an energy source. The last meal of the day provides enough energy to fuel the body for a couple of hours. Then, the energy stored within the body will be used for the next six hours. At that point, the body shifts to burning off fat as its energy source. “This is why fasting protocols are 16 hours or longer, to give the body time to transition into fat burning,” said Corey.

People who follow a properly planned intermittent fasting protocol could potentially see weight loss in the range of one to two pounds a week. When combined with exercise, it’s possible to increase the weight loss to up to three or four pounds a week.

Effects on aging

Fasting supercharges metabolism, making the body more efficient at breaking down nutrients and burning calories. It also slows down the degradation of DNA, which is what occurs when we age, and accelerates DNA repair, thus slowing down the aging process.

Fasting also increases the levels of antioxidants that can help prevent the body’s cells from being broken down by free radicals, which are molecules that can cause damage to cells. Additionally, fasting can reduce the chronic inflammation that occurs as people age. “Intermittent fasting can help people live a better quality of life for a longer period of time,” said Corey.

Improved physical and mental health

Fasting has been shown to improve cholesterol levels by increasing high-density lipoprotein (HDL), or good cholesterol, and decreasing low-density lipoprotein (LDL), or bad cholesterol. It can also lower blood pressure, improve glucose control, and reduce fat deposits in the liver. Fasting can also enhance the state of the stomach’s bacteria, called the gut microbiome, which can improve both physical and mental health. It can also help with sleep quality, cognition and memory.



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Healthy food still matters

While fasting, it's important to maintain a healthy diet. This starts with protein. "During the fat-burning period of a fast, people are at risk of breaking down protein to use as an energy source if they're not consuming enough during their feeding window," said Corey. "It's important to focus on consuming enough protein to prevent any kind of muscle loss or breakdown."

Ideally, some form of protein should be consumed during every meal or snack. These protein sources could include eggs, Greek yogurt, protein shakes, chicken, fish, beef or plant-based proteins, such as beans and lentils.

The body also needs a good balance of other nutrients, including fruits and vegetables and healthy carbohydrate sources, such as brown rice, whole wheat bread and quinoa.

Who is intermittent fasting for?

Intermittent fasting works best for people in two main groups, including those who:

Are trying to lose weight.

Are trying to live a healthier life.

Conversely, these four groups of people would not benefit from intermittent fasting:

Pregnant women, who need consistent nutrition throughout the day.

Youth (under the age of 18), who are still trying to develop healthy eating habits; they could take fasting to an extreme that could lead to an eating disorder.

People newly diagnosed with a chronic disease, such as diabetes; these individuals need a focused, therapeutic approach to controlling and managing their disease

Shift workers, who may find it difficult to maintain consistent feeding and fasting windows.

Additional factors to consider

An exercise regimen will increase the benefits of intermittent fasting. "To get the biggest benefit, exercising or working out should occur near the end of the fasting window," said Corey. "It's important to time the exercise so it ends when the feeding window is about to start."

Before starting an intermittent fasting protocol, it's important to speak with an expert in the field, someone with experience setting up these programs. "People who don't set up their feeding windows properly with the right nutritional program are at risk of losing muscle mass and not experiencing the full benefits of following such a protocol," said Corey.

"Intermittent fasting is a safe and effective approach for weight loss, anti-aging and improved overall health," said Corey. "It challenges people to be mindful of the nutrition they're consuming and when they're consuming it. It can be a beneficial program for a lot of people."

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