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Essential Guide to *Intermittent Fasting*

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Over the past few years there has been quite a bit of “hype” around intermittent fasting. Celebrities including Jennifer Aniston, Kourtney Kardashian, Hugh Jackman and Halle Berry are attributing their amazing physique and youthful appearance to Intermittent Fasting (IF). Is there a scientific basis for intermittent fasting? And should you be jumping on this intermittent fasting bandwagon too?

The short answer is YES!

Clinical studies have indeed found a number of health benefits to the practice of intermittent fasting.

These include:

- achieving and maintaining healthy weight
- blood glucose and insulin regulation for diabetics
- improving digestive health
- inflammation reduction
- cholesterol reduction
- cancer risk reduction
- Improve response/tolerability of chemotherapy treatments

IF is not always appropriate for everyone, and many people are NOT doing it right, which can actually do more harm than good. Let's start by understanding the scientific evidence behind why IF can be beneficial.

What is Intermittent fasting?

The word “intermittent” refers to (an event) occurring at intervals (as opposed to steadily or constantly); fasting to abstaining from eating. So, intermittent fasting means not eating during certain time intervals. Intermittent fasting can be done daily (fasting periods of 12-16 hours), weekly (5 days of eating “normally” and 2 days of very low to no calorie intake at all), or monthly (fasting for up to 48 hours once to twice a month).

Given that too much caloric restriction done too often can have a negative impact on health (i.e. immune suppression, fatigue, and hunger), the most frequently recommended type of fasting is daily.

With the daily method, the goal is to fast for 16 hours and feast during the other 8 hours. For example, you may choose to break your fast at 8am, and have your last meal of the day by 4pm. However if this seems like an impossible task at first, it may be better to begin with a 12:12 regimen (12 hour fast and 12 hour eating window), then strive for a 14: 10 regimen (14 hour fast and 10 hour eating window).

During the hours of fasting, no calories should be consumed. However water, green tea/herbal tea and black tea or coffee (preferably without the added sugar and cream/milk) can be enjoyed. The whole point is to NOT ingest anything that requires your digestive system to break down, and/or add calories, so that all the hormones required to break down/absorb nutrients (except water) get a break.

The Science of Intermittent Fasting

Historically, the human body has adapted to survive with having to go through long periods of fasting (due to scarcity of food). This has been the case since as far back as the hunter-gatherer days. However, over the past century especially the last 50 years, especially in the developed countries, food has become readily available essentially 24/7, all year round. The genetic traits that allowed our ancestors to survive famines is now contributing to obesity, diabetes and many other health issues. One major contributing factor is that the body that has adapted to periodical fasting is now being fed much more frequently.



Humans are diurnal animals (active during the day, inactive at night), the biological processes in our bodies are programmed to follow the same circadian rhythm. Humans are meant to feed when there is light, and rest (and fast) when it is dark. Studies have shown when this rhythmic eating/fasting, awake/sleep cycle is disrupted over long periods of time, health issues arise. Specifically, shift workers have significantly increased (40-60% more) risk of obesity and metabolic syndrome, and on average have a shorter life span. We may not all be shift workers, but since the invention of artificial lighting, humans have been eating during “dark hours”, and chronic disease is on the rise. Certainly, there are many other factors contributing to chronic illness, but the change in eating (and sleeping) schedule plays a crucial role.

Thus, the goal of intermittent fasting is to shift our eating habits into rhythm with our hardwired biology, thus allowing our bodies to function at their best.

Common Misconceptions of Intermittent fasting

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Unhealthy food choices/Over consumption

No matter how well you stick to the *timing* of your meals, the *content* still matters. When doing intermittent fasting, it is easy to miss out on all the nutrients your body needs (including protein, healthy fats, and vitamin and minerals). When eating schedule is altered, your food choices may be drastically different. For example, if you choose to fast from 8pm the night before until noon the next day, you may not eat your daily green smoothie and scrambled eggs as you 1st meal. Instead you may be breaking your fast with your lunch (which is often rushed on a work day). As such you end up eating a small sandwich, or a simple salad. When you are eating less frequently during the day, it is especially important that each meal is healthy and offers adequate nutrition. The key to help prevent undernourishment is to plan your meals ahead and ensure that each of the meals you do eat consists of at least 50% -75% colourful veggies, up to 25% protein, and no more than 25% carbohydrates.

Unhealthy eating schedule

Often times, when implementing intermittent fasting, is it easy to pick eating times that are more *convenient* (in terms of your daily activities), and not what is best for the body. It is not uncommon for people doing IF to simply skip up to two meals a day and then binge eat at the end of the day.

For example, one may choose to skip both breakfast and lunch (due to busy work days) and then break their fast at 4pm followed by a large meal at 10pm. While this type of eating stays within the IF schedule, it is not a healthy way to eat. Our hormones associated with digestion are not meant to work late at night. Eating late at night can lead to digestive upset such as heartburn and also negatively impact the positive impact IF is meant achieve.

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Unrealistic expectations

Enthusiasm is wonderful! However, as with any lifestyle changes you decide to make for better health, the key to success with IF is ensuring that it is made to suit your health needs as well as lifestyle. So take the time to plan how you would start IF.



If you are new to fasting, then it would be recommended to start gently (perhaps a 12:12 hour schedule), in order to avoid side effects that may be difficult to manage, such as hunger and mood swings. Then decide what kind of schedule would work best for your work schedule/family life. There is no point in making drastic changes with strict rules that you can only continue for a week because they are unrealistic. Remember,

Overeating

It is not uncommon to end up consuming MORE food during intermittent fasting than when one eats with a “normal” schedule.

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Again, just because your fasting periods are longer (when doing intermittent fasting), doesn't mean that you are to cram all of the calories you normally ate during the usual 14 hour feeding window into the now shortened 8 hours. It is easy to fall into this trap, as the sudden change in eating schedule can lead to hunger (especially when you first begin). This is where it is especially important to choose healthy foods that will prevent sudden and dramatic glucose spikes.



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Glucose regulation disruption

While intermittent fasting can be beneficial for those with diabetes, not doing it properly can lead to sudden blood sugar drops that can be detrimental to some patients. It is especially important for those with diabetes or even those with pre-diabetes to monitor blood sugar closely when making drastic dietary changes so as to prevent hypoglycaemia.



As such it is not advised for diabetics to begin intermittent fasting without consulting with their doctors.

Cautions of Intermittent Fasting

First and foremost, you should always consult your health care provider before making big changes to your lifestyle, including intermittent fasting.

Please note that you should NOT be doing intermittent fasting if you are:

- pregnant or breast-feeding
- trying to conceive
- Experiencing menstrual cycle issues
- under the age of 18
- have a history of eating disorder(s)
- If you are underweight
- If you have liver or kidney disease

This list is not complete, as such it is important to consult your doctor before commencing any major dietary changes. Also, if you are diabetic, and/or especially if you are taking medication, it is important to NOT be making any dietary changes without expert supervision.

Medical Supervision

When you decide to incorporate intermittent fasting into your lifestyle, to ensure that it is not negatively impacting your health, especially if you have existing health issues (such as diabetes, or inflammatory disease) it is necessary to have blood work done. Ideally lab work should be done before and after implementing intermittent fasting.



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