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Is intermittent fasting healthy?

Intermittent fasting is a popular way to lose weight, with recipe collections, diet plans and apps dedicated to it. Going between periods of fasting and eating may help people manage their weight and health, according to research – and may even help to reduce the risk of diseases such as type 2 diabetes. But how does it work and is it safe?

What is intermittent fasting?

Intermittent fasting is an eating plan that switches between fasting and [eating](#) on a regular schedule. While traditional diets specify what you should eat, intermittent fasting focuses on when you should eat instead. This may mean fasting for a certain number of hours each day.

"There are many variations of intermittent fasting but in each version food intake is restricted for a period of time and then you can eat in a non-restricted way for the remaining period of time," says Chloe Hall, a dietitian and spokesperson for the [British Dietetic Association](#).

What's the 5:2 diet?

A popular version of intermittent fasting is the [5:2 diet](#). Dieters are recommended to eat a normal number of [calories](#) for five days a week (around 2,000 for women and 2,500 for men), but to eat just 25% of their usual calorie intake for two, non-consecutive days.

This means restricting calories to around 500 for women and 600 for men. There are no restrictions on the types of food you can eat.

Another system, called the 16/8 method, involves restricting your eating to an eight-hour period before fasting for the 16 hours in between.

Intermittent fasting benefits

Fasting has long been associated with religious rituals, and some researchers argue that our bodies have evolved to be able to go without [food](#) for many hours or even days.

When humans were hunter-gatherers, going for long periods without eating was common. In recent years, however, the main benefits of intermittent fasting have been in its capacity to manage [weight](#).

Intermittent fasting for weight loss

Today, there is a growing body of evidence suggesting that specific types of intermittent fasting diets may be beneficial for certain people, including those with [obesity](#) and those at high risk of developing [type 2 diabetes](#).

After hours without food, the body uses up its sugar stores and begins to burn body fat. This is sometimes referred to as metabolic switching. Intermittent fasting extends the period when your body has burned through the calories consumed during your last meal and begins spending fat.

Intermittent fasting to reduce cholesterol

"Some studies have shown that, as well as weight or fat loss, intermittent fasting may help improve [cholesterol](#) levels²," says Hall.

Intermittent fasting for type 2 diabetes

Some [studies](#) of humans have suggested that intermittent fasting can have health benefits for those with – or at risk of – developing [type 2 diabetes](#), such as weight loss and lowering insulin requirements³.

However, for people with type 2 diabetes, it's important to consult a medical professional before embarking on intermittent fasting.

Although intermittent fasting may help people with type 2 diabetes improve their blood sugar control and reduce insulin resistance, it can also lead to potentially dangerous [hypoglycaemia](#) (low blood sugar) in people taking certain medicines to treat diabetes, including [sulfonylureas](#) and insulin.

It is also important to note that most research has consisted of small, short-term studies. Therefore, less is known about the long-term impact of intermittent fasting.

Downsides of intermittent fasting

There are also downsides to intermittent fasting. Not all fasting regimes are beneficial and for some, it may lead to [headaches](#), problems concentrating, irritability and feeling faint and tired. It can also be easy to overeat during non-fasting periods too. This is because the hormones linked to appetite and hunger can go into overdrive when you are deprived of food.

It may also be more beneficial to concentrate on eating a [balanced diet](#) with plenty of fibre, fruit and vegetables, rather than fasting or stopping eating. "One diet is not right for everyone and the diet may not be sustainable," says Hall. "There is a lack of long-term studies at present and smaller healthy changes may be more sustainable than a restricted diet."

Additionally, recent research has suggested that the time in which you eat may be more important than the time spent fasting⁴. Earlier this year, researchers at Northwestern University discovered those who started eating before 8:30am had lower blood sugar levels and less insulin resistance, which could reduce the risk of developing type 2 diabetes.

It's also important to note that intermittent fasting can lead to an unhealthy focus on diet and eating habits too. It can be easy for diet regimes to become all-encompassing, which can lead to [disordered eating](#) and [anxiety](#). "For those who have a history of eating disorders, any restrictive diet may be triggering for an eating disorder recurrence," says Hall.

How to prepare for intermittent fasting

Speak to your doctor

If you want to try intermittent fasting, it is important to consult your doctor first. They will be able to provide you with advice to ensure you are safe and healthy. If you're underweight, have a history of eating disorders or are [pregnant](#) or breastfeeding, fasting is not advisable.

"Anyone with a long-term health condition, especially diabetes, should discuss this with their health professional before starting any sort of diet," says Hall.

Keep track of how you feel

It is important to bear in mind that intermittent fasting may have different side effects on different people. If you start experiencing anxiety, [mood changes](#), headaches, nausea, changes to your periods, or other symptoms, speak to your doctor.

If you have been fasting for more than a few hours, break the fast by eating a small snack such as a few crackers. Tackling a full meal straightaway could lead to indigestion and stomach problems.

Focus on healthy foods

It is crucial to follow a healthy, balanced diet and eating pattern, and you should aim to eat five portions of fruit and vegetables every day. Include plenty of fibre and whole grains in your diet and drink at least six to eight glasses of fluids every 24 hours .

"On 'unrestricted' days try to eat normally with regular meals and a healthy balanced diet rather than eating vast quantities of junk food," says Hall.

Further reading

1. [Yang et al: Effect of an intermittent calorie-restricted diet on type 2 diabetes remission: A randomised controlled trial.](#)
 2. [Ahmed et al: Impact of intermittent fasting on lipid profile - A quasi-randomised clinical trial.](#)
 3. [Welton et al: Intermittent fasting and weight loss.](#)
 4. [Endocrine Society: Eating before 8.30am could reduce risk factors for type 2 diabetes.](#)
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1. [Welton et al: Intermittent fasting and weight loss.](#)

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Authored by:	Peer Reviewed by: Dr Colin Tidy, MRCGP	
Originally Published: 20/11/2023	Next review date: 27/10/2023	Document ID: doc_31598

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