



The FAST WAY TO BETTER HEALTH (& WEIGHT LOSS)

Whether you call it intermittent fasting, periodic fasting or the 5:2 diet, what matters is that it's a pattern of eating that has scientifically proven benefits. Dietician Annchen Weidemann tells us how it works.

By **Anna Rich**

Don't even think about intermittent fasting if:

- You're younger than 19
- You're diabetic. 'Although fasting improves diabetes,' says Annchen, 'we don't yet know how to conduct a fast with diabetics.'
- You're pregnant or breast-

feeding. 'There's nothing telling us that it's harmful, but to be safe, I wouldn't advise it during pregnancy. But if you find out you're pregnant and you have been fasting, it's not a problem.'

- You're frail, have lost a lot of weight, have an eating disorder or have an underlying disease. 'A fasting lifestyle helps prevent cancer, but it's not a cure,' Annchen says.

'The other day, a woman brought me flowers to thank me for making her a grandma,' says dietician Annchen Weidemann. 'Her daughter had fallen pregnant at last.' At her practice, Annchen specialises in the treatment of infertility and polycystic ovary syndrome. 'I have lots of testimonials like that,' she says. 'It's wonderful!'

The research to back up her approach isn't yet published, but Annchen is sure intermittent fasting will be established as a protocol in treating infertility. 'I can't see a better way of getting an overweight woman to lose weight to fall pregnant. If you're overweight, you'll almost always have elevated insulin levels, she says. 'Those insulin levels disturb the theca cells of the ovaries, and anovulation is the first kick-out of that response. Elevated male hormone levels are the second response.' A Dutch study has shown that even if a severely obese woman is still ovulating, she's 43% less likely to fall pregnant.

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Fertility not your issue? Don't stop reading, because intermittent fasting might be your best bet for shedding and, crucially, keeping off the weight. (If you're anything like us, you probably wouldn't mind losing a kilo or two. Or five. Or 10.) Besides, there are other proven health benefits to this lifestyle.

'Intermittent fasting is not a new thing,' Annchen says. 'It's been practised for millennia, not just for spiritual reasons, but for health reasons too. It's a sound scientific discipline, with extensive research behind it.' Since 1932, more than 4 500 studies on fasting or intermittent fasting have been published. Annchen has been researching it since she was at university 35 years ago, where she learnt that caloric restriction has a longevity effect. (She herself has lived a fasting lifestyle ever since.) 'If you cut the calorie intake of animals in the lab, whether they're rats or fruit flies, they lived much longer than their peers.'

Just don't confuse fasting with starvation. 'There's a huge difference,' Annchen explains. 'Starvation is ongoing, and devastating. With fasting, you put aside a set number of hours during which there's no nutritional intake.'

WHAT EXACTLY IS INTERMITTENT FASTING?

In a nutshell: for two days a week, skip either breakfast or supper. For the other five days, eat three healthy meals a day as usual. No need to count calories or weigh or measure portions.

'It's more about the time you eat and the time you spend not eating,' says Annchen.

'I tell my patients, "It's not what you eat that will make you thin, but what you don't eat."'

ON THE TWO FAST DAYS:

- You don't fast 24/7, but for 16 to 18 hours at a stretch. Cut out either breakfast or supper so your caloric intake is less than half of what it usually is. (If you need specifics, go for 600 calories, whether you're male or female, irrespective of your frame or size. You'd be surprised how well you can eat on 600 calories!)
- Prefer to skip supper? Then eat your breakfast and lunch within the first eight waking hours. So if you eat your first meal at 8am, then your last meal of the day could be as late as 4pm. If skipping breakfast suits you better, eat at 11am and have supper at 7pm.
- You'll get better results if you do the fast days back to back – better weight loss effect and better body composition (lean muscle to fat). Research shows that four days of fasting is best for weight loss, but that isn't really practical, especially if you work an eight-hour day and have a family.
- You don't have to stick to the same days every week – see how your week goes.
- There's nothing unhealthy about skipping breakfast or moving it out by a few hours. Many people force themselves to eat starch-rich foods soon after they wake up because of the notion that we have to start the day with breakfast. But don't snack or drink coffee with sugar and milk or cream instead!
- Try not to eat anything too high in calories – use lower-fat milk products, cut out starchy foods and alcohol. (Don't worry about this on non-fasting days.)
- Feel free to drink black coffee (as long as you're not drinking too many cups a day), rooibos tea without milk, green tea, water, sparkling water, peppermint water, lemon water (lemon doesn't have a high fructose content). No soda water – anything with fizz is high in sodium.

THE OTHER FIVE DAYS:

- Eat three healthy meals a day.
- Don't overeat, thinking that the fasting days will forgive all your sins! You're just going to be spinning your wheels if you overeat – you are not going to lose any weight.
- Don't snack. Snacking causes insulin secretion, and you want to normalise that as far as possible. Digestion is a massive metabolic process; every meal is a rush of nutrients, which brings about an inflammatory response. We need to eat, but not so often that we bring on inflammation. Have four to five-hour resting periods between meals.
- Take the starch out of supper. That reduces the caloric value of the meal so the body isn't as stressed during sleep as it would be otherwise.
- When you start your fast, on the first evening (if you're skipping supper), you might feel a couple of hunger pangs. Drink a glass of water and wait it out – it becomes easier and easier. Your eating hormones – most importantly insulin, leptin and ghrelin – become used to not being fluffed up all the time. They have a chance to get back to normal when you're fasting.
- Don't eat late-night snacks.
- Whether it's a fasting or non-fasting day, never drink liquid sugar.
- There's no need to go fat free or low fat – eat good quality fats but no trans fats.

FAQs

CAN YOU EXERCISE WHEN YOU'RE FASTING?

Yes. Do it while you're still fasting, says Annchen – in the early morning or five hours after lunch, before supper. 'If you elicit an insulin response before exercise, it causes sluggishness.'

The 2012 Olympic Games happened to coincide with Ramadan, which raised the question of whether Muslim athletes would be at a disadvantage if they continued to fast. Ron Maughan, professor of sport and exercise nutrition at Loughborough University, UK, and his team analysed hundreds of studies and found that intermittent fasting – and observing Ramadan – had 'little or no effect on the health or performance of most athletes'.

DOES FASTING SLOW DOWN YOUR METABOLISM?

No. 'Your metabolism slows only when you starve,' Annchen explains. 'And that starts after three days. In fact, it improves in 16 to 18 hours.'

THE SCIENCE STUFF

WHY 5:2 WORKS BETTER THAN DIETING

It's sustainable – two fast days a week is easier to stick to than a diet. When Annchen began her master's on polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) in 2008 the benefits of intermittent fasting for weight loss in particular became apparent. 'I was looking at the best and easiest ways to lose weight, and stumbled on studies that included large groups of women (with or without PCOS) who were trying to lose weight. Those who did intermittent fasting rather than a 24/7 diet did far better.' After losing weight, we tend to regain it – and more. 'This is where fasting is handy: every five days you're fasting again, pushing your body back into weight loss mode.' It's not just about weight loss on the scale. Dr Krista Varady of the University of Illinois, US, found that fasting improved body composition – fasters saw greater reductions in fat tissue and increased lean muscle mass.

HOW 5:2 WORKS

Annchen says intermittent fasting is a form of hormesis: applying mild stress (like fasting) improves the functioning of the body's systems. 'Exercise is also a good example,' she says. 'When you exercise, your muscle tissue breaks down. But in the recovery process you become stronger.'

In the foreword of Annchen's book, *Periodic Fasting*, world-renowned endocrinologist Professor Tess van der Merwe explains that the stress of periodic calorie restriction can elicit the cytoprotective effect [chemical compounds provide protection to cells against harmful agents] which improves health, especially for those who are overweight or diabetic. Some of the biggest benefits are an improvement in glucose metabolism, an increase in insulin sensitivity, cardio protection and less age-related brain deterioration.

- Lower cancer risk: periodic fasting reduces insulin-like growth factor-1 (IGF-1), which is associated with the development of breast and prostate cancers in particular.
- Protection against degenerative brain diseases – thanks to increased brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), says Professor Mark Mattson, a neuroscientist at the US National Institute on Aging.
- Increased insulin sensitivity: bigger fat cells cause over stimulation of insulin. If this persists, the beta cells of the pancreas are next in line to become overstimulated, and insulin resistance sets in. If you lose weight, as you do with intermittent fasting, the process is reversed because your body becomes more sensitive to insulin again, and you're less likely to develop diabetes. The effect isn't as marked in full-time dieters who lost the same amount of weight, Annchen notes. ❖

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