

Is Intermittent Fasting Healthy?

One thing is certain in the field of health: what is common wisdom today can easily become “misapplied science” tomorrow. What’s “in” this year may be “out” next year. Often it’s hard to arrive at the right answer.

For example: Oily fish is good for you because the Omega-3’s are so healthy, but oily fish is bad because it can be contaminated with heavy metals, but oily fish is good because recent tests prove it’s not actually very contaminated, but oily fish is bad because the fishing industry paid for those tests...you get my point.

The [Fats](#) vs. [Carbs](#) argument is another. So when a reader recently asked about regular fasting as a means of maintaining good health, I had to re-evaluate my point of view slightly. What I found surprised me and convinced me to add a new twist to my ongoing health-and-anti-aging regimen. It’s called **Intermittent Fasting** – or IF.

Twenty years ago, as I was first forming my [Primal Health](#) point-of-view (based on a model of how humans evolved), I found it very easy to embrace the concept of “grazing” that seemed to represent the collective conscious of the weight-loss-and-health movement at the time. After all, eating several small meals a day – grazing to maintain even blood sugar and to avoid having your body go into starvation mode and start hoarding gobs of fat – seemed to fit my picture of early humans roaming the plains of Africa foraging for roots, shoots, nuts, berries, grubs and the occasional road-kill leftover from a hyena feast. The explanation that we in the weight-loss business gave the public was that by maintaining this steady supply of protein, fats and carbs throughout the day we would never experience a wild swing in blood sugar due to rapid rises and falls in insulin, therefore we would be less inclined to store fat and more inclined to burn off our existing fat stores. **Heaven help us if we skipped breakfast, overate or**

starved ourselves periodically. That would surely wreak havoc on the delicate hormonal systems keeping us in homeostatic balance.

Well, maybe not.

The truth is, many people have succeeded in losing weight and keeping most of it off using this simple grazing method, which consists of eating 5 or 6 small meals or snacks spread evenly throughout the day, with no single meal exceeding 600 calories and where each meal or snack contains a little protein. This grazing method is the ultimate in portion control: take the 2400 (or more) calories you might otherwise scarf down in 2 meals and simply spread them evenly throughout the day. I think it's reasonable to project that many more have avoided or postponed getting type 2 diabetes using the same method.

But like many behaviors in the fitness and health world, there comes a point where the benefits decrease and we find ourselves on the dreaded plateau.

The first thing most people will tell you about their attempts at grazing is, while it usually works well if you are diligent, it's pretty difficult to stick with, since you need to be near a source of quality food every few hours. If you work at home most days as I do, it's not a problem, but it can make life difficult if you work in an office setting or happen to be a road warrior.

The next common issue is that after a few months of progress, you arrive at a frustrating point where the weight stops coming off, the initial high energy levels decline or you stop building muscle. That makes sense from an evolutionary perspective, since the body is so well-tuned to adapt to any situation – including a perfectly even flow of nutrients. In this case, the body's reaction to this steady supply of nutrition is to actually decrease insulin sensitivity. It “knows” there will always be food, so it “down-regulates” insulin receptors, and probably down-regulates other metabolic systems as well.

In my [Primal Health](#) articles here at MDA, I am always looking at ways we

can harness our DNA blueprint to maximize health. I like to see how we can shake things up a little and trick the body into burning more fuel, creating more lean muscle, repairing cell damage and staying injury- and illness-free. So when my 79-year-old buddy Sid at the gym started raving about his weekly 24-hour fast over a year ago, and my friend Art started [writing](#) about his own fasting experiences, I decided to look into it further.

The results were surprising and impressive.

Numerous animal and human studies done over the past 15 years suggest that periodic fasting can have dramatic results not only in areas of weight (fat) loss, but in overall health and longevity as well. A [recent article](#) in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* gives a great overview of these benefits which include decreases in blood pressure, reduction in oxidative damage to lipids, protein and DNA, improvement in insulin sensitivity and glucose uptake, as well as decreases in fat mass.

How can you argue with results like these? And it all makes sense from an evolutionary perspective, because our predecessors almost certainly went through regular cycles where food was either abundant or very scarce. The body may have established protective mechanisms to adapt to these conditions by sensitizing insulin receptors when it was critical that every bit of food be efficiently used or stored (as in famine), or by desensitizing them when there was a surplus, so the body wouldn't be overly-burdened by [grossly excessive calorie intake](#).

Beyond insulin sensitivity, it appears that caloric restriction and intermittent fasting may “turn on” certain genes that repair specific tissues that would not otherwise be repaired in times of surplus. One could surmise that this adaptation serves to allow certain cells to live longer (as repaired cells) during famine since it's energetically less expensive to repair a cell than to divide and create a new one. That might help explain some of the extended longevity seen in animal studies using caloric restriction and/or intermittent fasting (read about [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)). Intermittent fasting has also been shown to reduce spontaneous cancers in [animal studies](#),

which could be due to a decrease in oxidative damage or an increase in immune response.

So, what are the practical applications of this research?

It depends. There's probably no right answer (remember what I said at the beginning!) Art suggests mimicking the experiences of our ancestors, which is to say don't plan any fast, just surprise your body every once in a while with 24 hours of little or no food. My friend Sid does his fast every Tuesday like clockwork, so he has a light final meal on Monday night and doesn't eat again until Wednesday breakfast. He does drink water and a little juice on his fasting day. Some fasting programs suggest you take a two-week "cleansing" approach where you eat regularly every other day and fast (or eat 40% of normal) on alternate days for two weeks twice a year.

One thing that is most interesting about the intermittent fasting studies is that slightly overeating on the non-fasting days (to make up for the lack of calories on fast days) yielded similar results, so it wasn't so much about total calories as it was about the **episodic deprivation**.

As for me, I'm going to try the once a week deal, but I'll start by no longer agonizing over a skipped breakfast or late dinner. What I used to think was the end of the world might just be the beginning of a new one!

Let me know of your own fasting experiences.

Further Reading:

[My Carb Pyramid](#)

[Healthy Recipes](#)