

Intermittent Fasting - What I Need to Know

As well as making improvements to what we eat, reducing how often we eat can have health benefits. For some people cutting out snacks is enough to see these benefits, but for others intermittent fasting works well. This approach is particularly popular alongside a low carbohydrate approach, in part because people are often less hungry when they lower their carb intake.

What is intermittent fasting?

Intermittent fasting is an eating pattern where you cycle between periods of eating and periods of fasting (not eating). There are lots of different ways to do this, and the eating and fasting periods can be changed from week to week, or even day to day, to fit in with your schedule.

During periods of eating it is important that you stick to healthy eating principles (such as avoiding ultra-processed foods), otherwise any benefits that you might see from intermittent fasting could be undone.



If you take medication to help manage your health you should discuss any plans to reduce your eating frequency with your healthcare team BEFORE you make big changes.

Two common examples of intermittent fasting are explored below:

The 5:2 diet

For this approach you limit energy (calorie) intake for two days per week, usually to around 800 calories. It isn't therefore usually a true fast on these two days.

Most people do not have their "fast" days on consecutive days. You can choose the two most convenient days in the week, and they can be different days each week if you wish. This means this approach can be easily adapted to suit your needs.

There are other approaches similar to the 5:2 diet, with more fasting days (e.g., fasting for three days, eating on four), or fewer fasts (e.g., fasting for one day and eating on six). You can adjust the number of fasting days you have each week based on your schedule, goals or preferences.

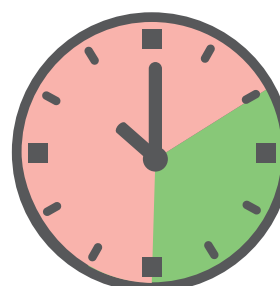
Time-restricted eating

In this approach you select an eating window, usually between four hours (such as from 2pm to 6pm) and eight hours (such as from 11am to 7pm), and only eat during these times.

This is commonly performed simply by skipping breakfast, which results in an extended fast between the evening meal on one day and lunch the next. If you are a breakfast lover though you can always omit a different meal!

You can use time-restricted eating every day or just on certain days of the week. The days can be changed from week to week if you would like too.

At first some people find it difficult to miss a meal, but they often report that it becomes easier over time.



**This topic is explored further on X-PERT programmes and in X-PERT Handbooks.
For more information, visit www.xperthealth.org.uk.**

What are the benefits?



One reason for trying intermittent fasting is to help reduce insulin levels. These are increased when we eat or drink (especially when we have carbohydrate containing foods or drinks). This means that having longer periods where we have not eaten anything is the best way to help keep insulin levels low.

Having lower insulin levels increases the amount of time that the body is able to use its own fat stores, so intermittent fasting is good for weight loss. This is explained more in the box to the right. It also helps to reduce insulin resistance, as both of the main causes of insulin resistance (too much body fat and high insulin levels) are improved.

Intermittent fasting also helps with weight management in another way - by reducing total energy (calorie) intake. Some people believe that when we miss a meal we end up eating much more later on to make up for it. Research on the subject has found that this is not true though, with the total amount eaten during the day usually being less in people practicing intermittent fasting.

What are the negatives?



At first you may experience hunger when you miss a meal, but these feelings are often psychological - as you are used to eating at certain times - and usually go away as you get used to this eating pattern.

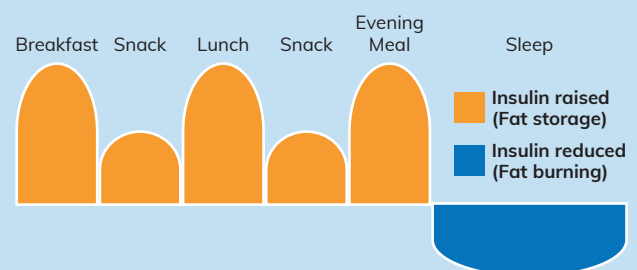
There are a number of myths and misconceptions surrounding fasting, which may put you off trying it. Some of the most common are discussed on the next page.

Importantly, intermittent fasting is not dangerous for most people. However, as noted before, **it is important to discuss this with your healthcare team before you try intermittent fasting if you take any medication to manage your health.**

Fasting reduces insulin levels and increases fat burning

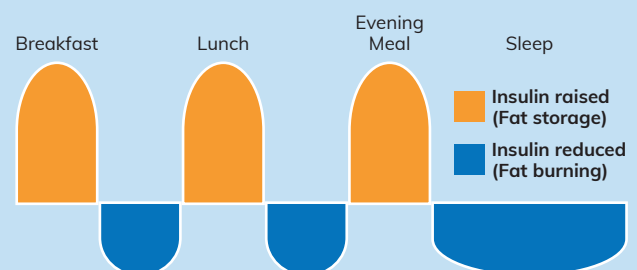
Three meals a day with regular snacking

Having frequent meals and snacking between them means insulin levels are raised for most of the day. This reduces the amount of time the body is able to use stored body fat for energy.



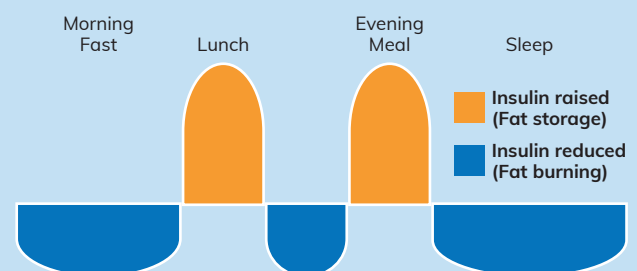
Three meals a day, no snacks

If snacks are removed there is more time in the day where insulin levels are reduced. As a result there is also more time that body fat can be used for energy.



Intermittent fasting (time restricted eating, as an example)

Intermittent fasting, for example by only eating one or two meals per day, results in lower insulin levels for extended periods. This increases fat burning time.



Intermittent Fasting Myths



“It’s just starving yourself.”

Fasting is a planned action to avoid food for a set period of time. The body can still use energy from its own fat stores during a fast, so it isn’t being deprived. Starvation is completely different. It is unplanned, it doesn’t have a chosen end point, and the body doesn’t have much stored energy that it can use. It is simply untrue to say that fasting is the same as starving yourself!

“It will slow your metabolism.”

When someone follows a reduced calorie diet but continues to eat regularly (i.e., “little and often”), insulin levels remain high for most of the day. This stops the body from using stored fat for energy. It responds by reducing the amount of calories it burns, to save what energy it does have (i.e., it slows your metabolism). Fasting is different. During a fast, insulin levels are reduced, so fat stored in the body can be used for energy. This means that metabolism does not need to be slowed down, as the body does not think it is being deprived.



“Breakfast is the most important meal of the day.”

In the morning, the body’s releases hormones to get us ready to start the day. This causes the release of energy from the body’s stores, which means we don’t actually need to eat something first thing in the morning, as the body is being fed whether you eat something or not! No meal is more important than any other. What does matter is that you get all the nutrients you need from what you do eat.

“You’ll be deprived of essential nutrients.”

As long as a range of real foods are eaten in the non-fasting periods, there is no reason that people who try intermittent fasting should experience any nutrient deficiencies.



“It’ll make your body break down muscle.”

If available, the body will always use glucose and/or fat for fuel. Your muscles, and the proteins they are made up of, are only a last resort for this. Studies have shown that intermittent fasting does not cause significant muscle loss. It is important that sufficient protein is eaten in the non-fasting periods though in order to support the growth and maintenance of muscle mass.

“You’ll be hungry all the time and will just eat much more at the next meal.”

Studies have shown that missing a meal may result in slightly more food being eaten at the next meal, but the total energy intake will still be less than if you had eaten both meals. Fasting decreases hunger hormones and increases fullness. So although you may feel hungry when you first try fasting, many people actually report reduced hunger once they are used to it.

Stay hydrated

When you eat, you get some water from your food. So during a fast, you are missing out on some of the fluids you normally get. This can lead to you becoming dehydrated, causing side effects such as tiredness and headaches. Dehydration can also be mistaken for hunger, which can make it more difficult to stick to your planned fast.



The best option for staying hydrated is water. If you want to make it a bit more exciting then you can flavour it, with a slice of lemon, orange, lime or cucumber for example. Coffee (black or flavoured with natural extracts), tea (black, green, herbal or fruit), or broth (bone or vegetable) are all also suitable options.

Stick with it

Stick with it!

You may struggle at first if you are not used to going for extended periods of time without food, but much of this could be down to habit. If you have had a set routine for a long time your body will expect to receive food at certain times of the day. So when it doesn't get the food it is expecting, this can trigger feelings of hunger. Most people adapt quite quickly though, so find it increasingly easy to fast. But in the short-term, make sure you have thought about what you could do to try and distract yourself when you feel hungry.

Break your fast with nutritious foods

At the end of your fast, have a meal that includes plenty of real, minimally processed food. Make sure this meal includes one or two portions of good quality protein. This will help to satisfy your appetite, and to make sure your body gets plenty of nutrients. Planning a meal that supports your dietary approach but also includes some of your favourite foods to break your fast with can help to motivate you to stick with it too.



Make sure you get enough salt



People often think salt is unhealthy, but we do need some in our diet. Sodium is an essential nutrient, and the main source of it is salt. When you are not eating (i.e., during a fast), you are not taking in any salt. On top of this, the reduction in insulin levels during fasting results in less salt being held in the blood. Signs of having low sodium levels include dizziness (caused by a drop in blood pressure), muscle cramps, headaches and tiredness. These symptoms can be fixed by making sure you get enough salt and water. Salt can be added to meals in non-fasting periods, or you can get more by having salted water or bone broth during fasting periods.

Don't worry if you regain a bit of weight after a fast

When you fast you will lose weight because your body is using up some of your stored fat for fuel. But you will also lose some weight for other reasons, including that there will be less food and waste passing through your body. This means that when you break your fast you might actually regain a little bit of weight. This is completely normal though, so you should not feel disappointed. The good news is that you will still have reduced the amount of fat stored in your body!

