

INTERMITTENT FASTING:

JUST A FAD OR A LIFE CHANGER?

Over the years the wellness and weight-loss industry has exploded, so much so that it's now worth a staggering £12.4 billion. So if you're feeling a little confused and bombarded by different 'miracle solutions', it's no surprise.

One of the hottest buzz terms currently in the spotlight is 'intermittent fasting', with celebrities and social media stars raving about the impact restricting your food intake at certain times can have on not just your weight, but also your health. There are even claims that it can slow down ageing, both inside and out. So what is intermittent fasting? Read on for the details...

THE BASICS:

Although this may seem like a new and unfamiliar term, humans have been fasting since the beginning of time. Whether it be just overnight whilst asleep (yes, that counts) or for longer periods of time due to scarcity of food or for religious reasons, fasting is not a new concept. However, intermittent fasting (IF), is when a person deliberately fasts during a specified window of time in order to achieve health-related results.

DIFFERENT IF TECHNIQUES:

There are different schools of thought when it comes to IF. Some swear by the 5:2 technique; this is when you fast for two days a week and eat a healthy diet the other five. Fasting in this scenario is generally sticking to around 500 calories. That might seem an impossibly low figure, but a fasting day with this technique could look like the following:

BREAKFAST: One medium scrambled egg (*around 81 cals*)

LUNCH: Can of Heinz Lentil Soup (*182 cals*)

DINNER: One fillet of roasted cod with a cup of plain broccoli (*218 cals*)

TOTAL: 481 cals

The other most popular technique centres around daily time windows. Currently we all fast for a certain time period when we're asleep.

So if you have a snack or supper around 9pm and don't eat again until 9am, you've inadvertently fasted for 12 hours.

Deliberate IF techniques take this a step further, the two most popular time window fasts include the 16/8 and the 18/6.

The 16/8 means you fast for 16 hours a day, leaving you with an eight hour eating period.

For example; breakfast at 10am, lunch as normal and then finish dinner by no later than 6pm. After 6pm only water and zero calorie beverages are consumed.

The 18/6 leaves you with an eating window of six hours, so this technique

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typically involves cutting out breakfast and eating the first meal of the day at around noon and having your last meal before 6pm, with no food passing your lips again until noon the next day.

This technique has caused some controversy amongst those who advocate breakfast being the most important meal of the day, yet followers of IF have found cutting breakfast works for them.

Some experienced fasters close the window even further, going for 20 hours without eating or sometimes even stretching it to 24 hours on certain days.

However, these techniques are of course more extreme and should not be tried without first seeking medical advice and carrying out extensive health research beforehand.

HEALTH BENEFIT CLAIMS

Since IF became so popular, various studies have been carried out and most have found some links between fasting and increased longevity. In fact a study on rats found that the ones who were fasted as part of the experiment lived 83% longer than those who were given a normal diet. The other reported benefits include:

CELLULAR REPAIR

Studies have found that during a period of not eating, the body has time to 'clean up' and repair the cells in the body, also known as autophagy. This process has been linked to longer life spans and the reduction in risk of contracting a number of different diseases, including Parkinson's and certain types of dementia.

LOWERS IGF-1

High levels of this growth hormone in adulthood have been linked to an increased risk of certain cancers, including breast and prostate cancer, as well as type 2 diabetes. The IGF-1 hormone is also linked to overall ageing.

IMPROVES BLOOD PRESSURE WHILST ALSO LOWERING LDL CHOLESTEROL

Heart disease is the world's biggest killer and both high blood pressure and LDL cholesterol can increase the risk of developing it. High blood pressure puts a strain on the heart as it means it has to work harder to pump blood around the body. Meanwhile too much 'bad' cholesterol, LDL, in the blood can cause plaque to form in the arteries. Clogged arteries can cut off blood supply to the heart, causing a heart attack.

LOWERS BLOOD SUGAR LEVELS

Type 2 diabetes affects the way your body metabolises sugar, which can cause blood sugar levels to become too high. This happens because the pancreas no longer produces enough insulin which is used to control glucose levels. But studies have found a link between IF and a decrease in insulin resistance and significantly lowered blood sugar levels.

DECREASES INFLAMMATION

In recent years there have been studies into the impact of chronic inflammation on our health. Normal inflammation is a regular part of the body's processes as it helps fight infection and deal with injury.

But when inflammation goes on too long and becomes a regular mechanism that happens when the body doesn't need it, it becomes an issue. In fact, chronic inflammation has now been linked to stroke, heart disease and autoimmune disorders.

WEIGHT-LOSS

If you restrict calories two days a week or end up eating fewer calories because you only have a certain time period to consume food for the day, as long as you don't binge and stick to a healthy eating regime whilst not fasting, weight-loss is a likely outcome.

PROMOTES 'HEALTHY AGEING'

Research by Harvard University found that all of the health benefits listed here can contribute to 'healthy ageing'. "Although previous work has shown how intermittent fasting can slow ageing, we are only beginning to understand the underlying biology," says William Mair, associate professor of genetics and complex diseases at Harvard. He continued, "Our findings open up new avenues in the search for therapeutic strategies that will reduce our likelihood of developing age related diseases as we get older."

However, it must be stated that much more research is needed before any of the claims can be thought of as fact as many of the studies, though encouraging, are small.

There are many factors that may mean IF is not for you so it's important that you speak with a doctor or other healthcare professional before making any radical changes to your diet or daily calorie consumption.