



Intermittent fasting... what is it and does it work?

Intermittent fasting is a weight loss approach which has been around for many years in various forms. It has been gaining traction and popularity since it was publicised in the 2012 television documentary *Eat Fast, Live Longer* by Dr Michael Mosley and books such as *The Fast Diet*, *The Obesity Code* and the *5-2 Diet*.



Intermittent fasting is essentially about allowing the body to use its stored energy. If we eat more food than can immediately be used or burnt off through physical activity, it is stored in the body as fat.

Insulin is the key hormone involved in the storage of food energy, and rises when we eat, helping to store the excess energy. There is no limit to the amount of fat that can be stored.

This process goes in reverse when we do not eat (e.g. fasting). Insulin levels fall, signalling our body to start burning stored energy, and our fat cells can then release their stored sugar to be used as energy. We lose weight if we let our insulin levels go down.

The entire idea of intermittent fasting is to allow the insulin levels to go down far enough and for long enough that we burn fat.

What does intermittent fasting look like?

Rather than strict food rules defining what you can eat, fasting is about the timing of your meals. There are different regimes – with the main ones being 5:2, where you have a very low energy intake two days a week but eat normally the rest of the time, and 16:8, where you only have an eight-hour window to eat each day.

Finding an intermittent fasting regime that works for you is essential. Other methods include fasting for 12 hours per day, alternating fasting days, a weekly 24 hour fast period and meal skipping.

A recent study on a group of obese men with prediabetes compared a form of intermittent fasting called “early time-restricted feeding.” One group were required to eat all their meals in an eight-hour period of the day (7am to 3pm), whilst the second group could eat over 12 hours (between 7am and 7pm). Both groups maintained their weight (did not gain or lose) but after five weeks, the eight-hour group had dramatically lower insulin levels and significantly lower blood pressure. The best part, the eight-hour group also had significantly decreased appetite, though were never starving.

This study showed that just changing the timing of meals, by eating earlier in the day and extending the overnight fast, significantly benefited metabolism even in people who didn’t lose weight.

It also reduced insulin levels which may facilitate weight loss by burning stored sugar as energy, instead of storing it as fat.

Another small scale study looked at the 5:2 method in overweight or obese women, and found restricting calories twice weekly did result in weight loss. There were also positive health benefits with reduced insulin, cholesterol and blood pressure levels.

Is it suitable for you?

There is good scientific evidence suggesting that intermittent fasting, when combined with a healthy diet and lifestyle, can be an effective approach to weight loss, and can reduce the risk of cancer, dementia and diabetes, and improve longevity.

Although there are many positives, it is not uncommon for some people to gain weight with intermittent fasting. This is because people may eat larger amounts during their eating periods to make up for hours spent fasting.

Remember, intermittent fasting is not going to be effective if you find you are constantly hungry. As with any weight loss or healthy lifestyle change, it needs to be enjoyable and sustainable.

Fasting is not suitable for some people. If you are considering fasting, you should check with your GP.

Important ingredients for a healthy lifestyle



▶ Eat foods that will satisfy you, including plenty of fruits, vegetables, nuts, fish, beans, lentils, whole grains, lean proteins, and healthy fats. Avoid refined starchy carbohydrates such as bread, pasta, potatoes, processed cereals and white rice.



▶ Consider a simple form of intermittent fasting, by limiting the hours of the day you eat. Start by reducing your daily 'eating time' to 12 hours (e.g. have breakfast after 8am, and dinner before 8pm), and then after a couple weeks, try to decrease it to 10 hours.

▶ Keep active every day, take the stairs instead of the lift, and stand up and move every hour.

▶ Occasionally give in to temptation. Maybe it's a piece of cake at morning tea, or dessert when dining out.



▶ Take some time out each day to relax and destress. Go for a walk to get some fresh air and vitamin D, or download the Smiling Mind app and give mindfulness a try.

Black bean breakfast bowl

This easy, protein rich breakfast will keep you feeling full for longer, helping you keep away those mid-morning or late afternoon cravings.

Ready in 10-15 minutes

Ingredients – Serves two

- ▶ 2 tablespoons olive oil
- ▶ 4 eggs, beaten
- ▶ 1 can black beans, drained and rinsed
- ▶ 1 avocado
- ▶ ¼ cup salsa (or 1 x chopped tomato)
- ▶ Salt and pepper, to taste

Method

- ▶ Heat olive oil in a small pan over medium heat. Cook and stir eggs until eggs are set, approximately three – five minutes.
- ▶ Place black beans in a microwave-safe bowl. Heat on high in the microwave until warm, about one minute.
- ▶ Divide warmed black beans between two bowls.
- ▶ Top each bowl with scrambled eggs, avocado, and salsa. Season with salt and black pepper.



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