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## WEIGHT LOSS

# Could fasting be health's holy grail?

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**T**rying – and failing – to shift those extra kilos, no matter how hard you try?

Some experts now say that your brain simply has its own sense of what your body weight should be and programs the body to return to this “set point”, no matter how much exercise you do or what diet you follow.

These experts have advice about how to coach your brain and body to accept a new “set point”.

Confusion about which diet to follow, says Hanneljie Edeling, counselling psychologist, registered dietician and author, leads to overeating and binge-eating, condemning one to a vicious – and ineffectual – dieting cycle.

But all is not lost. There is one dieting strategy that most experts agree works and has many health benefits: intermittent fasting. It is becoming increasingly popular, says weight-loss expert and registered dietician Amanda Weber from Somerset West. One reason is that it is easy to implement and to stick to. It does not focus so much on what one eats but when one eats.

Intermittent fasting involves fasting for 16 hours, though the range seems fairly flexible, with some fasting for as few as 14 hours and others for as long as 18 hours. This could mean having dinner at 7pm and fasting until 11am the next day. The result is that one does one's eating between 11am and 7pm – two or three meals within an eight-hour period. While fasting, one is allowed to drink water, black coffee, herbal tea or diluted juice. The aim is to drink a beverage with fewer than 50 calories so that one's body remains in a fasting state.

the best results in clients who follow a high protein and low-carb diet while practising intermittent fasting.

Fasting has many other benefits besides weight loss. During ketosis, a complex set of metabolic processes can reduce inflammation, a condition that can lead to various diseases such as cancer, multiple sclerosis, cardiovascular disease and Alzheimers.

But it is not necessarily for everyone. Weber says it is contraindicated for those with a history of eating disorders, those who take medication every few hours or those who suffer from diabetes. In some instances, athletes may also find it difficult to sustain their blood sugar levels while fasting. Edeling says women should not practise it during menstruation.

Ideally, intermittent fasting should be implemented gradually so the body can adapt to using fat as an energy source. Jumping in at the deep end can have unpleasant side-effects such as dizziness and nausea.

Prof Ross Tucker, a Cape Town-based exercise physiologist, urges caution, saying that the evidence in favour of intermittent fasting is inconclusive. He cites research showing that a group following a calorie-restricted diet and eating three meals spread out over the whole day, and another group eating the same amount of calories while practising intermittent fasting experienced similar rates of weight loss.

There is a theoretical danger that fasting causes a disruption to one's normal appetite and biochemical balance. For example, one's body responds to energy supply and switches one's metabolism down a level if one has not eaten before exercising.

An alternative to daily fasting is to fast for one or two days per week. On the fasting days, one may eat a total of 500 calories a day and then follow a normal diet the rest of the week.

Weber explains that when fasting, one's body initially uses carbohydrates as fuel. Once this source is depleted, the body starts to break down the fat stored in cells to produce ketones. These ketones enter the bloodstream and are used to produce energy in the cells. By depleting fat stores, ketosis causes real weight loss.

Research is inconclusive about how long it takes to reach a state of ketosis.

Edeling warns that women metabolise food differently from men, and some individuals take longer to reach ketosis.

According to Weber, intermittent fasting promotes weight loss regardless of which diet one follows. However, it is important to avoid sugar and eat healthy, unprocessed, free-range food that includes fibre and all the essential nutrients. Her advice to clients is to make a lifestyle change and to eat less and healthier. Variables such as gender, age, hormones and exercise regime all play a role in determining how much weight one will lose.

Edeling says she has seen

Tucker warns that people who fast and exercise more than five hours per week could develop severe metabolic problems. In women, the first manifestation can be amenorrhoea. Other side-effects include a lack of energy, a compromised immune system, reduced bone density, and central nervous system and neurological problems.

Men could develop low libido, and cardiovascular and bone density problems.

Alissa Rumsey, a New York City-based dietician, adds that depriving oneself of food can increase levels of cortisol, the body's stress hormone. This could reverse the benefits of fasting and encourage the fat storage associated with increased stress. Stress can also result in headaches and dizziness, irritability and depression. She says humans need fuel to stay healthy so we should listen to our bodies and not create hard and fast rules about eating habits.

And that's surely the real point. Everyone has a unique biochemistry. Experiment cautiously and find out what works best for you. Even if you don't end up losing weight, most experts agree that intermittent fasting will add healthy years to your lifespan.



### Flexible:

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