

Words About Wellness

Intermittent fasting and health: What is the evidence?

Fasting has been practiced for centuries for both spiritual and health reasons, but intermittent fasting has only recently become popular, with a growing body of research indicating that there may be health benefits – to not only what we eat, but when we eat. Intermittent fasting involves a regimen of eating for a specified time, and then abstaining from food altogether for another specified time period. Intermittent fasting can be carried out as part of a daily routine, e.g., eating between the hours of 8am to 6pm, and then abstaining from food between the hours of 6pm and 8am the next day. Length of time without food may vary from 12 to 18 hours each day, depending on individuals' state of health, goals, and preference. Alternatively, intermittent fasting can involve eating every other day while fasting or greatly lowering food intake in between those days.

Research findings in animals, and to a more limited extent in humans, are providing evidence that intermittent fasting may improve risk markers for chronic disease, such as lowered cholesterol, reduced insulin resistance, and decreased blood pressure, as well as facilitate needed weight loss. There are also indications that fasting, including intermittent fasting, may improve mental function and decrease symptoms of depression. Additionally, small trials are showing promise for the possible benefits of intermittent fasting or fasting mimicking diets in improving outcomes and lowering side effects in cancer patients using chemotherapy protocols. Exciting research is also exploring the possible health benefits on intermittent fasting for enhancing longevity.

An important aspect of intermittent fasting is the quality of one's diet, in terms of nutrient balance and nutrient density. A number of excellent books and articles describe how to implement intermittent fasting, and report on the evidence backing up the benefits of this approach. In the column to the right, you will find a few publications you may wish to explore as you investigate intermittent fasting for yourself or your patients.



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