Intermittent Fasting (IF): Is It Good for You?

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Fasting has been around for thousands of years, mostly at the service of religious doctrine and contemplation. Recently, it’s made a resurgence into the mainstream as a discipline called Intermittent Fasting (IT) for weight loss. Its proponents tout other assumed health benefits for both the body and the brain, such as a reduction in triglycerides. I use the word ‘assumed’ here because most of the results are anecdotal and there have not been any longitudinal studies to date, although what studies that do exist show promise but not more promise than any other calorie restrictive diet.

Let’s take a look at what the diet proposes to do and measure that against what evidence currently exists.

The variants

There are two major variants of Intermittent Fasting (IT), although if you’ve skipped breakfast sometimes, you’ve already participated in this type of fasting:

* Whole-day fasting – this involves regular whole-day fasts with the strictest form being alternative day fasting where you fast for one 24 hour period, then eat for 24 hours and continue alternating in that way. Then there’s the alternative day modified fasting (ADMF) and the 5:2 diet where one eats 4 days per week and fasts on weekends or more days of fasting that allow 500-600 calories on fasting days.
* Time restricted fasting – involves eating only a certain number of hours per day such as fasting for 16 hours, followed by 8 hours of eating. Another form is 12 hours eating followed by 12 hours of fasting or maybe eating only one meal per day.

One can see how it would be difficult to provide any controlled longitudinal studies under such variables.

The Data

In animals, calorie restriction has been shown to [increase and improve tolerance to various metabolic stresses in the body.](https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/press-releases/molecular-mechanism-behind-health-benefits-of-dietary-restriction-identified/)

[Here, the evidence is strong for calorie restriction in animal studies, but there is less convincing evidence in human studies. According to Harvard School of Public Health, “Proponents of the diet believe that the stress of intermittent fasting causes an immune response that repairs cells and produces positive metabolic changes (reduction in triglycerides, LDL cholesterol, blood pressure, weight, fat mass, blood glucose)…”among other suggested benefits. However, the results of studies show no significant difference in weight loss between IF and other calorie restriction diets. In fact, IF was shown to increase LDL cholesterol levels. Here are the results:](https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/press-releases/molecular-mechanism-behind-health-benefits-of-dietary-restriction-identified/)

* [“No significant differences in weight loss, weight regain, or body composition (e.g., fat mass, lean mass).”](https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/press-releases/molecular-mechanism-behind-health-benefits-of-dietary-restriction-identified/)
* [“No significant differences in blood pressure, heart rate, fasting glucose, and fasting insulin. At 12 months, although there were no differences in total cholesterol and triglycerides, the alternate-day fasting group showed significantly increased LDL cholesterol levels. The authors did not comment on a possible cause.”](https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/press-releases/molecular-mechanism-behind-health-benefits-of-dietary-restriction-identified/)

[So, there you have it. If you want to lose weight, there is no significant difference between Intermittent Fasting and other calorie reduction diets.](https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/press-releases/molecular-mechanism-behind-health-benefits-of-dietary-restriction-identified/)

[According to the Harvard School of Public Health, the following populations should abstain from IF:](https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/press-releases/molecular-mechanism-behind-health-benefits-of-dietary-restriction-identified/)

* [[Diabetes](https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/press-releases/molecular-mechanism-behind-health-benefits-of-dietary-restriction-identified/)](https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/diabetes-full-story/)
* [Eating disorders that involve unhealthy self-restriction (anorexia or bulimia nervosa)](https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/press-releases/molecular-mechanism-behind-health-benefits-of-dietary-restriction-identified/)
* [Use of medications that require food intake](https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/press-releases/molecular-mechanism-behind-health-benefits-of-dietary-restriction-identified/)
* [Active growth stage, such as in adolescents](https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/press-releases/molecular-mechanism-behind-health-benefits-of-dietary-restriction-identified/)
* [Pregnancy, breastfeeding](https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/press-releases/molecular-mechanism-behind-health-benefits-of-dietary-restriction-identified/)

RESEARCH

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