

Beginner's Guide to Fasting

Unlock your body's potential with
fasting

↳ **Assoc. Prof Caryn Zinn &
Prof Grant Schofield**





Associate Professor Caryn Zinn and Professor Grant Schofield, wrote the book *What The Fast?* where they explore cutting-edge science and distil it down to actionable tools for fasting.

Do you want to flip your metabolic switch and add fasting to your toolbelt of tools to optimise your health but don't know where to start with fasting or if it's even right for you?

Read on as we share the basics of fasting and how you can get started. Here you will find actionable tools that cut through the noise and help you understand how to incorporate fasting into your life to optimise your health and get better health outcomes for yourself, your family or your clients/ patients.

Is fasting for you?

Is the concept of 'fasting' – and perhaps even the word itself – too confronting to even think about, let alone contemplate doing? Does the thought of not eating automatically conjure up negative thoughts, such as hunger and discomfort?

If it does, you're likely not alone and it's not your fault. We've become so accustomed to eating at every opportunity, on every occasion, with every emotion, for fun, for fuel, for boredom and when the clock tells us to. But consider this: it hasn't always been that way.

Let's go back in time. Once, there were no clocks that indicated a prescribed meal-time. There were no 'breakfast' foods, 'lunch' foods, 'snack' foods, 'supper' foods' or 'dinner' foods. There was just food – and it was eaten when available and not eaten when not available. Simple as that.

Now, in the developed world, food is pretty much always available. For many, going without food today actually requires conscious effort. But here's the good news: there is nothing about fasting to be afraid of, because it's just not as hard as you think . . . if you do it right. The science is telling us that periods of not eating are good for us. This is nothing new, really.

Fasting was first mentioned in the Bible in 1500 BC – it was, apparently, mentioned 78 times, mostly for spiritual purposes. We now understand that fasting can help with weight loss, with preventing and improving chronic diseases, with allowing the body's cells to repair themselves, and even with promoting longevity (living longer).

Before you get stuck in, though, it is important to work out whether fasting is for you given your specific circumstances and your goals – and, most importantly, whether fasting is not for you. So, I urge you to take our 'What the Fast!' test. Fasting is not for everyone and, despite its potential health benefits, it can cause some people more harm than good, sometimes without them even realising it. So, you need to know if it is right for you before you buy in.

What the Fast? Test

Take the What The Fast? Test to find out if fasting is for you.

Answer YES or NO to each of these 12 questions. For each YES, score 1 point. For each NO, score 0 points.

- 1 Do you have unwanted body fat to lose?
- 2 Do you have unwanted body fat that you just don't seem to be able to shift?
- 3 Do you sometimes eat when you're not hungry? (i.e. out of boredom, happiness, sadness, celebrations and/or commiserations)
- 4 Do you want to improve your longevity? (i.e. 'live long, and healthily')
- 5 Do you want to be better equipped to minimise your risk of getting cancer?
- 6 Do you want to get your blood sugar levels under control?
- 7 Do you want to help regulate your hormones that control hunger and fullness?

- 8 Do you want to improve your overall eating patterns and habits?
- 9 Do you want to sharpen your mind and enhance your brain function?
- 10 Do you want to strengthen your immune system?
- 11 Do you feel like you need a detox?
- 12 Do you eat more than 28 times in a week? (4 times a day)

Once you've answered all the questions, tally your score.

Unlike most tests, where 6 out of 12 or 50% is a pass, in this test 1 out of 12 is a pass. That's because answering YES to just one of these questions means that you can benefit from fasting in some way.

That's a great start!

When Shouldn't You Fast?

Pregnant or breastfeeding

If you are pregnant or breastfeeding, fasting is not for you right now. It's unlikely to be harmful (because – let's face it – the morning sickness you often get in pregnancy means that you end up fasting some of the time), but the goal in this phase of your life is to optimise calories and nutrients for your baby. Fasting might very well be for you at a later date, so put it on hold and come back to this later.

Disordered eating

If you have a history of eating disorders or have an extremely volatile relationship with food (in that thinking about it causes you a serious amount of distress, beyond that which is considered normal), be wary of fasting. It could work for you or against you, so you need to make sure that you're doing it for the right reasons. If you do try it, make sure you keep close tabs on whether and how your emotions/state of mind are affected. If you feel confident about giving fasting a try, the best way to keep things in check is to 'start low and go slow'. By this I mean getting your fasting feet wet first by selecting an easy protocol to start with (i.e. missing one meal, like breakfast) and going from there.

If you find that this is not having any negative impact, you can carry on. Fasting might actually help improve your relationship with food, but if you find it having the opposite effect, then it's just not for you. Of course, this requires that you be mindful and honest with yourself and others. You might need to seek professional help to figure this out. The last thing we want is to cause harm to you and your loved ones. This aim of this book is to help you achieve optimal health and wellbeing.

Stressed

If you know you are a stress-bunny in general, be extra-careful if you decide to pursue fasting. The reason is that when you fast, your stress hormone cortisol increases. While this is no problem for those who don't suffer from anxiety, if you do then fasting has the potential to make things worse. So it might be that fasting is not for you, or that you need to take smaller steps than what we're suggesting in our Monday/Tuesday Super-Fasting method. Either way, the bottom line is to pay attention to how you feel, as you will soon work out whether fasting is or isn't beneficial for you and your health, physical or mental.

Under 18

If you are a growing child (under 18 years of age), just focus on growing and enjoying eating a whole-food diet, keeping regularly active and enjoying life. If you miss a meal unintentionally, as kids often do, that's fine – but leave purposeful fasting for later on.

Type 2 diabetes

Not eating is a great way to get your blood sugar and your HbA1c (a measure of long-term blood sugar control) heading towards, and even achieving, normal levels. If you have Type 2 diabetes and are not taking insulin, then fasting should in fact be part of your management plan. BUT when insulin is needed, it's a different ballgame. While this doesn't mean you can't fast, it does mean that you have to be armed with the right information beforehand, and you need to be prepared to adjust your medication as you go. Ideally you should do this in conjunction with a supportive medical professional. There are also diseases where fasting might not be recommended so talk to your medical professional before you contemplate fasting.



Fasting is an exciting new area of metabolic health and may be a useful tool for you, your friends and family or your clients/patients.

Always approach with caution and make sure you've done your homework before kicking into fasting.

There are of course many myths about fasting and more extreme prolonged fasting protocols, to learn about these check out our online course.

↳ Getting Started with Intermittent Fasting?

There are many types of intermittent fasting protocols, but they all have one thing in common – going a period of time without eating.

The most popular form of fasting is time-restricted eating (TRE), which basically means reducing the number of hours you can eat each day. This is called the eating window.

There is evidence that reducing this window to between 6-12 hours (without changing what you eat) positively impacts metabolic health and the gut microbiome [1,2].

TRE has been shown in human studies to reduce body weight and fat mass, improve glucose tolerance, and reduce blood pressure. Many of these benefits are particularly notable in people with overweight, obesity and with insulin resistance [3].

Isn't that great news? By simply skipping breakfast and eating your first meal at midday you can experience some of the positive effects of fasting.



A Closer Look at Fasting

Let's take a look at the main fasting methods out there, the ones which you've likely heard about. Because we are all different, you could try some of these if you like and see how you respond. Here, we've taken the liberty of commenting on our experiences and the behavioural and biological pluses/minuses of each method.

1 Compressed eating windows

In its easiest form, you simply fast for 16 hours – say 8 p.m. to 12 p.m. the next day – and eat whatever you want over the next 8 hours. This is the same as time restricted eating (TRE). The window could be compressed further to lengthen the fast and shorten the eating window. You can also choose when you do/don't eat based on personal preference and lifestyle. Some evidence suggests that skipping dinner may be more beneficial, but you need to weigh this up against the social friction it may create in your home environment as dinner is typically quite a social meal.

Pros

- It's just missing breakfast and is pretty easy to do.
- It's a good starting point for a lot of people who haven't yet dabbled with fasting.
- You can play around with the window depending on how you feel, your goals and your desire to self-experiment.
- Fasts of more than around 16 hours are likely to get insulin levels well down and autophagy is stimulated
- It's sustainable.

Cons

- Uncontrolled eating in the eating window could result in excessive eating.
- Without restriction on carbs and a plan to eat whole food, it's likely still to be a poor-quality diet.

We like this method. It's the easiest gateway to learning about fasting and overcoming the belief that you must eat otherwise you won't be able to function. The opposite is true, of course. This is the basis of Super-Fasting, but we believe a bit more structure around this is essential.

2 5:2 method

This is where you eat whatever you want, or at least your usual diet, on 5 days of the week but restrict your calories down to 500 kcal (females) or 600 kcal (males) on 2 days of the week. Meal timing is not discussed, and neither is the composition of the food.

Pros

- People eating this way do eat more on 'normal' days, but they will most likely still be in net calorie deficit over the week compared with the 'normal' eating.
- There are modest improvements in weight and other metabolic outcomes.
- The behavioural aspect of 'on' and 'off' days is appealing. Some find that very helpful.

Cons

- Without attention to meal timing and composition, including the composition of meals in the remainder of the week, it's unlikely that you'd develop your fat-burning abilities optimally.
- Without conquering the hunger biology, the 500/600 kcal days would hurt.
- You can actually spread your 500/600 kcal over the day in small increments, meaning that you wouldn't actually be getting the physiological benefits of fasting.
- If your off-days are junk, then the majority of your diet is still junk.

It's a good basis on which to build some better ideas to make this sustainable and do-able. That's what we have tried to do with Super-Fasting.

3 Alternate day fasting

This is where you fast every second day (there's also a modified version where you can have around 500 kcal on these days). Eat whatever you want on other days.

Pros

- People eating this way do tend to eat more on 'normal days' but less overall.
- There are good improvements in weight and other metabolic outcomes.
- The amount of fasting will force you to become a good fat-burner.
- The behavioural aspect of 'on' and 'off' days is appealing to some people

Cons

- This will likely hurt.
- If your off-days are junk, then the majority of your diet is still junk.

This can be pretty hard after a while. Socially, it's hard. We doubt whether it's sustainable in the long term, although some trials have had people maintain this for 6 months.

4 Super-fasting

You eat once a day, an evening meal, with no snacks and no alcohol, on 2 consecutive days. The evening Super-Meal is simple, filling and nutritious, and low in carbs. You don't overeat. The remaining days you ideally stick to a mainly LCHF plan based on whole foods (low HI factor). For a maximum of 3 meals per week, eating is allowed to deviate in some way (e.g. more carbs or a treat).

Pros

- You get all the biological advantages of the body's natural repair and cleaning process (autophagy).
- You maintain metabolic signalling through ketones, but are able to cycle back out of this to the natural anabolic process with the 3-meal rule.
- On the fasting days you eat a filling, nutrient-dense Super-Meal when you are naturally most hungry, i.e. in the evening.
- It's sustainable because it works with the body's natural biology, not against it.
- It's a great gateway for those interested in longer fasts.

Cons

- You need to be organised enough to have the Super-Meals prepared.
- If you use the 3-meal rule (3 treat meals a week) then you might not lose weight; you'll likely need to be stricter than that to succeed with weight loss.
- Overeating when not fasting may be an issue for some people.

Of course, we like this one! The devil, as in all of life, is in the detail. Structure around this is essential.

