

HEALTH & WELLNESS

Intermittent fasting is more than just a weight-loss regimen, says 10-year veteran Health coach

Dali Harilela wakes up at 4.30am, but doesn't have her first meal until lunchtime. She says her health regimen keeps her trim and healthy, and she is not alone, with more people trying out the fasting trend

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Dali Harilela hasn't had breakfast in 10 years – no omelettes, toast or smoothies since she started intermittent fasting in 2008.

The 48-year-old wakes up around 4.30am and does not have her first meal of the day until 1.30pm. She usually has dinner around 6pm, and it's the last thing she eats. Harilela prefers not to eat before she goes to bed to let her body settle. She follows a ketogenic diet, consuming more fat, less carbohydrates and a moderate amount of protein.

When Harilela, a health coach, started this regimen a decade ago, she felt the benefits immediately, including the loss of 4.5 kilograms in the first month.

“In the beginning, you lose weight, but it's water, not fat,” she says. A diet high in carbohydrates and sugars tends to be inflammatory, she claims, so adopting her new lifestyle reduced her water retention.

Other benefits include her feeling less stuffed and lighter. “Since sleep counts as fasting, when you wake up, you use the energy stored in your body; you start to lose body fat and burn fat in the right way,” she says.

The shift in her eating pattern wasn't difficult. "My mornings go by so quickly. [You have] a cup of tea or coffee, then you go about your morning, and if you're a busy person, you don't notice it," she says.

Before she took up fasting, she worked out regularly and followed a standard diet that included eating after workouts to replenish her body with nutrients.

"I thought I was doing all the right things, but my body didn't look right," she says. "She felt perpetually tired. Her Arab father and his friend suggested she try fasting, an integral part of Muslim culture, in traditions such as during Ramadan, for example.



In recent years, various types of food abstinence have emerged. Joelle Bradford, a naturopath at Hong Kong's Integrated Medicine Institute, says a lot of people are trying these intermittent diets in a bid to lose weight, live longer and stay healthy.

The different styles of fasting generally focus around forgoing food during set time frames, or eating only at specified times. They include alternate day fasting – abstaining from food for a day then eating normally the next day, and so on.

The 5:2 regimen sees adopters dine as usual for five days in a week, but have a restricted food intake for two non-consecutive days.

The amount of calories eaten during the restricted eating period varies. "It can be anywhere from 500 to 800 calories and it can be different for men and women, but it's about significantly reducing the amount of calories consumed on those fasting days," says Bradford.

The time-restricted eating regimen is defined not by how much you eat, but when you eat it. An example is the 16:8 ratio, in which an individual eats only during an eight-hour period;

Such methods mean forgoing one meal or more per day (such as breakfast), a prospect that is hard for people who have been brought up to believe that breakfast is the most important meal of the day, or that we must have three meals daily to avert blood sugar crashes and cravings. Other concerns are that starving the body will ruin one's metabolism.

Bradford says some of the concerns are well-founded, but a lot of them are incorrect.

A key benefit of fasting is the regulation of blood sugar, she says. That keeps us from suffering the constant roller coaster of glucose-related mood swings and cravings, and helps get rid of hormonal problems linked to a sugar imbalance.

Essentially, fasting is not just about weight control, but also averting chronic diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, heart disease and other disorders.

"We eat too much sugar and food, in general, as a society," says Bradford, adding that these chronic conditions are a consequence of this.



A 2017 study by researchers at the University of Southern California showed that fasting for five days a month lowered the risk of life-threatening diseases. The research – published in *Science Translational Medicine* – studied adults from 20 to 70 years old for three months. That included a group that fasted for five days a month.

Those that fasted lost an average of 2.72kg (six pounds), and exhibited lower cardiovascular and age-related disease risks, including lower blood pressure and reduced signs of inflammation. Participants also saw a drop in levels of IGF-1, a hormone that affects metabolism and has a similar molecular structure to insulin. Participants with elevated sugar levels saw their baseline glucose levels fall. Overall, the researchers noted that the regimen is associated with lowering the risks of age-related diseases including cancer, diabetes and heart disease.

Bradford sees fasting as creating controlled stresses for the body. Like exercise, one can reap the benefits when the body adapts to those stresses.

“Fasting over time lets your body adapt so that instead of using one’s glucose supply right away, when the stores have run out, the body switches to tap your fat stores for fuel,” she says.

A metabolism shift occurs once the body adapts to such a state and becomes better at using energy more efficiently, she says.

Intermittent fasting is popular among those with chronic digestive or auto-immune disorders. Besides giving the body a break from trying to process food that is difficult to digest, fasting generates beta-hydroxybutyrate (BHB), an anti-inflammatory compound, and changes the microorganisms in the body that help safeguard our health, Bradford says.

Bradford has seen IF’s positive impact on sufferers of hormonal and digestive issues who had previously struggled with lethargy, sluggishness, severe bloating and water retention.

“The most basic benefits for most people are insulin and glucose regulation,” she says. “Holding onto weight is typically a hormonal issue, and related to blood sugar regulation, and fasting can help that.”

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to intermittent fasting as everyone is different. The benefits are increasingly supported by research, but more studies are needed, particularly into the impact of time-restricted fasting.

Seek a medical practitioner’s advice on which style, if any, suits you and is safest, says Bradford.

A safe start is to try restricting your eating window from 16 hours a day, from breakfast at 6am to dinner as late as 10pm, for example, to just 12 hours a day, say from 8am to 8pm.