

# Fasting for Health: the wisdom of the ages



A Science of Medicine  
The Art of Care

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## Background

For thousands of years the human race has lived precariously between times of plenty of food, and times of famine. Fasting therefore closely resembles the way humans have eaten for eons, with periods of abundant food punctuated by failed harvests from pest, war, weather and vermin. Food scarcity and even starvation was

*Fasting is an important practice in most mono-theistic religions. The Muslims have Ramadan, the Christians Lent, and the Jews Yom Kippur. They have similar aims – penitence, spiritual purification, to cleanse the person, and to clear the mind temporarily of earthly matters.*

a constant fact of life in the not too distant past. As a result, we have adapted very well to going

without food intermittently for short periods of time.

Most religions consider the act of fasting to

be good for spiritual health, and encourage it as part of their doctrine. Even so, the health benefits of fasting were not widely recognized until the early 1900s, when food supplies became more efficient and secure, and the prospect of starvation gradually faded away. It was initially recommended for treating various disorders—such as diabetes, obesity and epilepsy. Today, fasting is coming to the fore, as the dangers to the community lurking in fast, energy-dense foods eaten on a frequent and regular basis are now recognised.

## Some questions on therapeutic fasting:

- *Is regular fasting good for us?*
- *What effect does fasting have upon Physis, our power for natural healing?*
- *Is fasting effective for those with chronic conditions, such as hypertension, diabetes, arthritis and asthma?*
- *Can fasting be a 'short cut' to losing excess body weight?*
- *Will regular fasting lead to a longer, healthier life?*

## ***What is Fasting?***

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Fasting means different things to different people. Therapeutic fasting is fasting carried out to prevent ill health, or to

*Fasting these days is seen as a natural route to better health or protection from disease, especially if supported by a prudent diet, physical exercise, fresh air, spiritual pursuits, and rejecting bad habits such as alcohol and drug use.*

treat a specific ailment. It is the willing, conscious and deliberate abstaining – partially or totally – from consuming food and/or drink for a pre-determined length of time. Sometimes it refers to alcoholic drink, sexual activity, even drinking tea,

coffee or soft drinks. The time for therapeutic fasting is at least 12 hours to a few days. Longer times can defeat the objective, as negative effects will manifest. Fasting for spiritual reasons can extend for longer; Ramadan, for example, can last for a full lunar month. Other forms of fasting are done to lose weight quickly, either for cosmetic reasons, or part of athletic, endurance or sporting preparations.

*There are all sorts of fast:*

- An **absolute fast** includes all food and water, as during Ramadan.
- A **partial fast** may be restricted to certain foods or drink.
- An **intermittent fast** (*aka a 5:2 diet*) will be a two-day fast per week, with the days separated.
- An **alternate fast** is limiting food, drink or other activities on alternative days for an extended period.
- A **modified fast** entails severely restricting food intake to a small fraction of the usual diet – typically 20% to 25%. This may take the form of one meal, usually breakfast, a day.

Some people fast one day a week; others fast one weekend a month. There is no hard and fast scheme, *but from vast experience over the centuries, the Tibb formats have proven very effective in achieving benefits.*

## ***What happens during Fasting?***

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From the Tibb perspective, fasting gives the body some 'breathing space' which allows Physis to carry out important activities towards restoring internal harmony. Even so, a number of metabolic changes occur in fasting, slowly at first, but increasing as the fasting continues.

- **Energy supply.** Glucose, our normal source of energy comes from the digestion of carbohydrates such as starch, or from sucrose present in sweetened foods. Missing a meal or two does not have any real effect, and our metabolism does not slow down much. In fact, our Physis makes rapid changes to maintain internal harmony. Going without food for days at a time will, however, bring in a number of changes. As the supply of glucose from food dries up, so the body turns to stored carbohydrates, such as glycogen in the liver and muscle to make up the shortfall. When this source is exhausted, the body turns to its fatty deposits, and later on to muscle protein, to provide energy. This running down of fatty deposits and muscle leads to a fall in body weight. These changes may be beneficial in the short term, but will be harmful over a longer period, leading to fatigue and bad breath.
- **Hormones.** Fasting definitely benefits the hormone (endocrine) system. Insulin sensitivity is improved by a short fast, so the absorption of glucose from the blood goes more efficiently. Insulin is a prime risk factor for both heart disease and diabetes, and a contributing factor to many chronic diseases. When normal eating is resumed, the normal swing in blood glucose levels through the day is dampened down. Also, levels of the hormone *ghrelin*, (*aka the 'hunger hormone'*), are restored towards the normal zone. Finally, growth hormone (HGH) secretion from the pituitary gland is boosted. This plays a pivotal role in our health, physical fitness and ageing processes.
- **The immune system.** During an extended fast of three days or more, much of the immune system is rejuvenated, and old, damaged or poorly performing cells are removed and discarded. The body's stem cells increase the

production of white blood cells. These important agents are essential for warding off infections. This applies particularly to elderly people, who are at increased risk of infection, cancer or other disorders.

- **Metabolism.** A number of beneficial metabolic changes have been noted in those who fast. For example, levels of the fatty substance triglyceride, a contributor to some heart disease, fall away once the fast is well underway. The reason is that no recently consumed meal provides the metabolic energy needed, so fat stores are used instead.
- **Free radicals.** The extent and intensity of free radical damage is reduced while fasting. This leads to less inflammation and oxidative stress. This helps to prevent damage to the person's genetic mechanisms. This may explain why fasting seems to ward off cancer and degenerative diseases, leading to a longer life.

### ***Tibb and Fasting***

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Tibb views fasting from an holistic perspective, recognising the physical, mental and spiritual benefits it can offer the person practising it.

*"The stomach is the home of all illnesses"*

[Hippocrates, 460-375 BCE]

*"The stomach is the home of disease, and abstinence the head of every remedy, so make this your custom" [Prophet Mohammed (pbuh), 570-632 CE]*

restore harmony to the body's myriad activities. Not having to deal with the complex activities involved in food consumption, digestion, assimilation and excretion, as well as alleviating stress, gives Physis a valuable opportunity to resolve disharmonies which have appeared between the body's qualities. Fasting allows Physis to direct more of its energy into rejuvenating important, but neglected, areas.

*Hippocrates was a keen supporter of fasting, and both Galen and Ibn Sina, two other pioneers of Tibb, recommended it for maintaining good health and warding off various ailments.*

spiritual or not. This helps to restore inner harmony and balance to the person's lifestyle. Its benefits are also enhanced if combined with other lifestyle Factors such as increased physical activity, better sleep, exposure to sunshine, and breathing good air.

- Imposing stress on the body is a good way to build up Physis. Going hungry regularly is an effective way of strengthening the various organs and systems. It is similar in a way to physical exercise boosting our general fitness.

Fasting has been one of Tibb's regimental therapies for centuries. Its value in treating chronic, recurring disorders by a completely natural route has long been recognised. It also infuses a sense of personal well-being. Tibb provides several reasons for someone to undertake a fast:

- Regular fasting gives the person's Physis more time to
- Fasting is accepted as a natural way of eliminating toxins and residual waste products from the body. It is therefore an integral part of one of the six major Tibb Lifestyle Factors, namely 'Elimination and Retention'.
- Fasting is an excellent partner to meditation, whether

### ***Tibb advice on Fasting***

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Fasting does not suit everyone. People with different temperaments respond differently. Some people find it makes

*Tibb believes that everyone has an internal 'doctor', an innate ability to deal with illness and restore good health. This inherent wisdom is called 'Physis'.*

them euphoric, others re-energised, and yet others irritable and bad-tempered. People with a predominantly phlegmatic or sanguineous temperament should respond best, but with bilious or melancholic temperaments, fasting may not be successful.

*For a successful fast, Tibb suggests persons considering it should be clear about:*

- **Why is the fast being done?** To lose weight? To detoxify the body? To deal with a specific ailment such as diabetes? To get the digestive system in order? For spiritual health reasons?
- **What form will the fast take?** All food? Skipping a meal each day, and which one? Which fluids will be consumed? Water alone, or low-cal beverages? Will other activities be involved, such as sex or smoking?
- **How long will the fast last?** For how many days, or on alternate days, or for 12, 24 or 36 hours?
- **When will the fast take place?** Between sunrise and sunset, or at weekends?
- **How will the fast be broken?** Tibb suggests slowly eating a small meal to start with, then another small, nutritious one before retiring for the night. (Eating a large meal, although attractive, is not recommended, as it can cause digestive problems).

A 'time protected' period for the fast should be selected: a few days which does not include holidays, examinations, family celebrations such as weddings, or visiting friends or family.

***Fasting is an integral part of dietotherapy, which is one of the principal regimental therapies in Tibb.***

### ***The Benefits of Fasting***

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Fasting is a valuable, non-intrusive and time-proven personal therapy. There are many benefits of even a short fast, and their number grows constantly. For instance, fasting lessens many symptoms in patients enduring various chronic diseases of lifestyle. Many of these benefits may be credited to Physis. During a fast it does not have to deal with problems caused by regular intake of different foods and drink at varying times. It can therefore carry out, without interruption, its basic role on a whole host of bodily processes which need its attention. Once the fasting ceases,

***In one study, those who fasted monthly were 58 percent less likely to have heart disease than those who did not.***

following up with a healthy diet and sensible habits magnifies the benefits achieved.

*The following are known to respond positively to fasting:*

- Irritable bowel syndrome, colitis, and other digestive ailments.
- Diabetes type 2. High blood sugar levels are restored towards normal.
- Elevated cholesterol levels.
- Cardiovascular health, especially high blood pressure.
- Skin disorders, such as psoriasis, allergies and eczema.

*Regular fasting also helps in the following:*

- Detoxing the body and cleansing the digestive and excretory systems.
- Losing excess body weight.
- Improving overall personal wellbeing and vitality.

*There is also some evidence that regular fasting:*

- Reduces mental stress and helps lift depression.
- Helps to increase a person's longevity.
- Reduces the overall risk of certain cancers.
- Repairs the person's damaged genetic make-up.

## ***Fasting for Weight Loss***

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Many, maybe most, people opt for fasting as a rapid, painless and economic way of shedding excess kilos. This issue is controversial, and not yet resolved.

Although a prolonged fast does lead to a fall in body mass, this loss, unfortunately, is due mainly to the loss of water and carbohydrate stores. It is rapidly made up once a normal diet is resumed. Why? Because the person's metabolic rate slows down, so the food consumed *after* the fast puts on more weight than it did *before* the fast. In fact, many people eat more after going through a fast, especially if they fast for a full day or skip a meal. Fasting is therefore not regarded as a healthy or feasible route to sustained weight loss. It may be an effective way for treating a number of medical disorders, but its not a viable option for cosmetic weight loss.

There is also the risk that fasting for weight loss can lead to 'compensatory gorging' after the fast is over.

## ***Fasting for a Longer Life***

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Fasting may help us keep our tissues and organs youthful, so enabling us to live longer. Regular serious fasting will

***A short fast is needed prior to surgery, and before blood tests for e.g. cholesterol and glucose.***

provide more opportunity for Physis to repair itself, and keep it in harmony for longer. Thus a longer life would be expected. Indeed, starvation of laboratory animals does seem to extend their lifespan. This is most evident in the lower animals, such as mice. However, the same does not seem to apply to humans.

Even so, intermittent fasting is regarded by many proponents as a viable route to living longer. It appears that other factors such as environmental factors, genetics or relieving stress are more likely to be the source of longer life.

## ***Precautions when Fasting***

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Not surprisingly, there are several groups of people who should not fast, as the effect on the body may be intolerable.

*Here are the main ones:*

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Pregnant or nursing women</b></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Anyone with moderate or severe diabetes</b></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Anyone severely underweight or suffering from malnutrition</b></li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Anyone with a serious heart problem</b></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Anyone with a late-stage cancer</b></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Anyone recuperating from surgery</b></li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Anyone with a kidney problem</b></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Children or the elderly, unless for medical reasons</b></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Anyone operating machinery, or driving some distance</b></li></ul>

Whatever fasting is undertaken, the person must avoid dehydration, as this leads to troubling symptoms and possible organ damage. To avoid this, copious water should be drunk frequently. Anyone undertaking fasting during Ramadan should drink at least two glasses of water daily beforehand. On completion of any fast, soups, soft fruits and non-alcoholic beverages should be taken to restore normal body fluid levels. Cold, high-sugar drinks should be avoided.

If the fasting is undergone to lose weight, the weight loss should be checked regularly. A too-rapid loss of kilos indicates dehydration and even breakdown of body tissues.

Anyone fasting should delay vigorous exercising until after the fast. Brisk walking and gentle exercises such as swimming are fine.

Also, anyone taking conventional drugs should take advice from their healthcare provider. Taking common drugs such as paracetamol can be harmful on an empty stomach.

## ***Summary***

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Fasting is both an important spiritual aspect of most religious doctrines, and one of the oldest therapies for treating chronic diseases of lifestyle and maintaining optimum health. The practice is now enjoying a revival of interest in today's society, due to its value in dealing with a wide range of health issues, especially those brought on by a dysfunctional lifestyle and poor personal habits. It is now being used to deal with disorders ranging from heart diseases to depression, from diabetes to digestive problems, and as a way of counteracting obesity and emotional stress. There are several versions of fasting: each enjoys a sometimes-brief degree of popularity. They range from absolute to partial in nature, from intermittent to alternate, from brief to prolonged in duration. Tibb has long been a firm advocate of fasting; it allows Physis the 'breathing space' necessary to carry out internal healing and restoration of harmony between the qualities. Fasting also supports the body's natural detoxification processes, an essential Lifestyle Factor in this increasingly toxic environment. As with all therapies, there are certain guidelines to its application, and a number of reasonable precautions.

## ***Further Reading***

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**Tibb: Fasting and Detox:** <<http://www.tibb.co.za/articles/fasting&detox.pdf>>

**Fasting Practice:** <<http://fitness.mercola.com/sites/fitness/archive/2013/11/08/beginners-guide-intermittent-fasting.aspx>>

**Benefits of Fasting:** <[http://www.webmd.com/diet/is\\_fasting\\_healthy](http://www.webmd.com/diet/is_fasting_healthy)>

**Fasting and Immunity:** <<http://dailyhealthpost.com/fasting-regenerate-immune-system/>>