



The 5:2 DIET *phenomenon*

Fad diets come and go like fluctuating weight, but the 5:2 diet is a stayer. Since Dr Michael Mosley introduced the intermittent calorie restriction regime in 2012, converts are consistently lowering weight, cholesterol, blood sugar and blood pressure. But is it effective, easy to apply and suitable for everyone?

WORDS / CAROLINE ROBERTSON

Before Dr Michael Mosley devised the 5:2 diet, he was part of an epidemic problem. Suffering dangerous markers for diabetes, heart disease, cancer and a high-fat BMI spurred him to seek solutions. By restricting his diet to 600 calories for two non-consecutive days weekly, Dr Mosley improved enormously: in just three months he lost 9kg of fat, including 10cm around his waist, balanced his BMI and improved indicators for diabetes, heart disease and cancer. His 2012 documentary *Eat, Fast, Live Longer* and book *The Fast Diet* have since inspired thousands to follow the 5:2 formula.

The success of the 5:2 diet lies in its simplicity. You can eat anything for five days of the week, though it's advised to stick to the recommended daily calories of 2000 for women and 2500 for men (being British, Mosley works in calories; in kilojoules that translates to 8363kJ and 10,460kJ). Then, on two non-consecutive days, the calorie intake is 500 for women and 600 for men (2092kJ and 2510kJ).

5:2 devotees have found that eating this way not only helps their health and weight loss but the meal mindfulness shifts overeating habits. Karen Huggett, director of At Ease Natural Therapies, who lost 8kg in six months on the 5:2 diet, explains.

"The biggest surprise for me was not the scale reading but the inches I lost around my midriff and hips, dropping two dress sizes," she says. "I found it easy providing I pre-planned my fast-day diet and didn't eat out on these days.

It's become a part of my life, making me more aware of portion sizes every day."

DIGGING YOUR GRAVE WITH YOUR FORK

Restricting calories for two days weekly works well for many people because it gives the digestion a chance to rest, repair and expel excess. Your body regenerates and increases its metabolism when you cut calories, whereas when you completely cut food it goes into starvation mode, storing fat and slowing metabolism. Intermittent calorie restriction also allows your

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People habitually eat when they're not hungry because they believe their body needs certain amounts at certain times. They also eat for emotional reasons such as to reward, counter fatigue, cover distasteful feelings or for pure pleasure! The overconsumption of empty calories has led to widespread obesity in the developed world. Hippocrates said "let food be thy medicine" but, for many, food has become fodder for disease and death. Overeating and under-exercising contribute to conditions such as high cholesterol, diabetes, high blood pressure, arthritis, heart disease,

skin disease, Alzheimer's, chronic inflammation and ageing.

Eating is essentially for energy; food is for fuel rather than gluttony. Healthy nutrition includes natural phases of fasting. This tames the tastebuds, refines the palate, restores body balance, clears the mind and reconnects you with spirit. Resting digestion with periodic fasting triggers your self-healing potential. Modern medicine is now confirming what great healers have practised for centuries, including Paracelsus who preached: "Fasting is the greatest remedy — the physician within."

FAST HEALING

Practising periodic calorie restriction within healthy limits has abundant benefits. Optimal improvement occurs when light-calorie foods are nutrient-rich and as pure as possible. Plentiful fluids and moderate movement facilitate the cleansing effect.

Following are some researched rewards of intermittent fasting.

Anti-ageing

Longevity has long been linked to low calorie consumption. Science has found that sirtuins, proteins produced on low-calorie diets, are a youth elixir. Animal studies since the 1930s have consistently shown a 40 per cent increase in maximum life span through lifelong dietary restriction. Cutting calories also reduces growth hormone IGF-1 levels, which results in higher cell longevity. Low-calorie diets increase brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), a protein vital for a healthy





FOOD THE 5:2 DIET

brain, nerves and new neural pathways. This increases memory and cognition, and reduces risk for Alzheimer's, according to an extensive study.

Awareness of eating habits

By monitoring and minimising eating for prescribed periods, you become more conscious of unhealthy eating habits. You stop automatically shovelling food into your mouth, pausing to pre-plan a high-nutrient, low-calorie intake. When you focus on quality rather than quantity, you reduce waste and savour every mouthful. Many people find that when they eat more mindfully their senses of smell and taste are also heightened.

Better sleep

You may have observed that a heavy dinner disturbs your sleep. Conversely, sleeping without being stuffed can have you awakening lighter and more refreshed. This is because while you were resting so was your digestion. This comment from the 5:2 diet Facebook group is a common insight: "My wife and I are coming up to our ninth month of 5:2 fasting. The morning after a fasting day, we have noticed that we sleep far better and wake up feeling pure, refreshed and much more vibrant and energetic."

Cellular regeneration

When the body is no longer burdened by constant food processing, it can attend to housekeeping and repairs. Autophagy, or self-eating, is one of the processes the fasting body uses to disassemble and rebuild damaged cells. Research indicates that damaged cells contribute to ageing issues and mopping them up reduces ageing free-radicals. Reducing calories also boosts energy-producing mitochondria, which then release fewer free radicals and repair cells more efficiently. Fasting switches on stem-cell synthesis, which is vital for immunity and regeneration, according to recent research by Professor Valter Longo of the University of Southern California in the US.

Clear skin & improved joints

A recent article in the *British Journal of Dermatology* concluded that "short-term fasting periods may improve severe symptoms" of skin complaints. Over my 25 years, I have observed adult patients who regularly fast improve symptoms of acne, eczema and psoriasis. This is because the blood gets a chance to purify and alkalise. *Survivor* contestant Tina Wesson said her rheumatoid



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arthritis was much better on the minimal diet during filming. Ayurvedic doctor Rama Prasad finds joint pain is pacified by fasting. Dr Prasad says, "Inflammatory conditions such as arthritis and fibromyalgia are fed by toxins; stop feeding them and they are starved of sustenance."

Eased asthma

One study by Professor Mark Mattson and Dr James Johnson involving obese asthmatics concluded that, after two months of intermittent fasting, volunteers improved their asthma and lost weight.

Increased energy

Food shopping, cooking, cleaning, digesting, assimilating and eliminating food can consume a lot of energy. Minimising this activity frees up our energy and boosts mitochondrial production of our cellular power, ATP (adenosine triphosphate).

Weight loss

Though weight loss is the main motivation for most people following the 5:2 diet, it's the health benefits that seem to drive their discipline in the long

term. On average, people lose around 0.45kg a week on the 5:2 diet. This sometimes plateaus or even reverses. It's important to exercise and to eat healthy quality and quantities of food on non-fast days to maintain weight loss. Healthy weight is vital for a long, healthy life. Obesity contributes to cancer, diabetes, Alzheimer's, cardiovascular disease, chronic inflammation and autoimmune disorders.

The 5:2 diet Facebook group is filled with happy testimonials such as this from Mr C Yates: "5 stone in 5 months ... plus no longer eating bread like I'm a duck." Ms L Corrigan shares, "How about cholesterol down from over 6 to 5.3? That'll do nicely, thank you!"

May reduce breast cancer risk

Dr Michelle Harvie and Professor Tony Howell, of the Genesis Breast Cancer Prevention Centre at the UK's University Hospital of South Manchester, found that 5:2 intermittent fasting reduced weight and hormones like insulin that promote breast cancer growth.

Mental clarity

Brain fog from overeating can result from endotoxic byproducts of an



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overburdened digestive system seeping into the brain. Veteran fasting expert Dr Gabriel Cousins remarks on how fasting has improved his patients: "Concentration seems to improve, the mind becomes more tranquil and a natural joy begins to appear. It is my hypothesis that when the physical toxins are cleared from the brain cells, mind-brain function automatically and significantly improves and spiritual capacities expand."

Money saving

It's surprising how much money most people put into their mouths. Intermittent fasting can cut your food bill as you reduce shopping and eating out significantly. Being aware of buying only nutritious food that you will definitely eat ensures food or money isn't wasted.

Purification

The digestive organs naturally start to detox and discard waste when they get a chance. Intermittent fasting gives them a window to clear the clutter. As Dr James F Balch, MD, says in *Prescription for Nutritional Healing*, "A fast can help you heal with greater speed; cleanse your liver, kidneys and colon; purify your blood; help you lose excess weight and water; flush out toxins; clear the eyes and tongue; and cleanse the breath."

5:2 TRIUMPH TIPS

Don't let a grumbly tummy dissuade you from following the 5:2 diet. After a few weeks you'll adapt to eating less and even enjoy feeling lighter and clearer. Stave off hunger pangs and reap optimal health results with the following tricks.

- Get a calorie counter book or app so you can keep track of your intake.
- Pre-plan meals and draw inspiration from cookbooks such as *The Ultimate 5:2 Diet Recipe Book: Easy, Calorie-Counted Fast Day Meals You'll Love* by Kate Harrison.
- Avoid eating out on fast days as you may yield to temptation.
- Protein meals make you feel fuller for longer than carbohydrate meals. High glycaemic index foods such as sugar, pasta, potatoes and grains will make your blood sugar rollercoaster from a high to a low of cravings.
- Favour foods such as legumes, fish, nuts, egg whites and low-carb vegetables. Dr Mosley describes a typical low-cal day: "A protein-rich breakfast — normally scrambled eggs or kippers. I drink several cups of black coffee and tea during the day, work happily through lunch and rarely feel any hunger pangs until late afternoon. When they happen, I simply ignore them or go for a brief stroll. In the evening, I have a bit of meat or fish and piles of steamed vegetables."
- Make dishes delicious with herbs and spices.
- Have a colourful variety of tastes and

textures including smoothies, soups, salads, veggie spaghetti, popcorn, bean burgers, pasties and mushrooms.

- Satisfy your tastebuds by sipping tangy teas through the day. Fennel is great to reduce sugar cravings while green tea stabilises blood sugar and suppresses hunger.
- Stay steadily busy on fast days to distract yourself. Write a to-do list you can turn to if your mind wanders to kitchen capers.
- Supplements that can reduce appetite and give you energy include N-acetylcysteine (NAC), alpha-lipoic acid, chromium, DL-phenylalanine and L-glutamine.
- Have low-cal snacks handy, such as beetroot dip, hummus and celery sticks, to tide you over.
- Increase leverage and motivation by telling others you're following this fast and do it with someone supportive. However, don't share your resolution with unsupportive people.
- If you fail to follow the diet one day, dedicate another day to it without remorse or guilt. This is a long-term lifestyle habit rather than an extreme quick fix.
- Don't overeat on non-fasting days. This will only sabotage your success.
- Many 5:2 adherents find that once they have attained their weight and health goals they are able to maintain progress by reducing the calorie-restricted diet to once a week — essentially a 6:1 diet.

Spiritual awareness

Many spiritual traditions endorse regular fasting. It takes our awareness from the dense body to the subtle spiritual realm. Our bodies feel lighter and our senses quieter. Yogic science says that, by controlling the tongue through awareness of eating and speaking, we can then control other emotions and appetites such as lust.

IS 5:2 FOR YOU?

With initial discipline, many people find the 5:2 diet easy to follow with fast results, especially when compared to stricter diets. Nutrient-rich foods keep you full on fasting days so you don't feel deprived or weak. Some people, however, may find prolonged pauses between meals make them moody, dizzy, tired, anxious and sick. Spreading snacks through the day may resolve these

issues. This diet isn't recommended for pregnant or breastfeeding women, children or teenagers and people with diagnosed diabetes or eating disorders. If you suffer from a chronic illness, check with your health provider to ensure this diet is suitable for you. 🍏

RESOURCES

- *The Fast Diet* by Dr Michael Mosley
- *The Fast Diet Recipe Book* by Mimi Spencer
- *The 5:2 Fast Diet Cookbook* by Samantha Logan
- *The 5:2 Cookbook: 100 Recipes for Fasting* by Angela Dowden
- 52recipes.co.uk

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