

## Fasting - The age old practice and why it is in vogue again

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Fasting is an age old tradition practiced for centuries by different cultures and regions of the world. This practice which was followed by mankind could have started due to religious beliefs, ancient customs pertaining to abstinence and spiritual health. Whatever maybe the reason this practice of “fasting” has immense health benefits both physical and mental.

The “fasting” trend caught the interest of many when Nobel laureate Yoshinori Ohsumi was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine for his discoveries of mechanisms for “autophagy” in 2016.

Autophagy is a fundamental process for degrading and recycling cellular components. Basically it denotes “self-eating”. Disrupted autophagy has been linked to several neurological diseases including Parkinson’s.

The fasting trend which has been time tested by ancestors became a health or weight loss tool when many celebrities in the movie industry benefited by following a suitable regimen. There were reports in some newspapers that some Silicon Valley entrepreneurs who regularly fast for at least 36 hours, by partaking only water are more “focused” mentally and have boosted their health. They feel more alert and seem to accomplish more work in lesser time, thereby improving their work efficiency.

If one is considering following a fasting regimen both to feel light and alert, or for weight loss, or to ward off ailments when growing old, let us first consider the different types of fast.

### Types of fast

**Dry Fast:** In the “hard” dry fast the individual does not even allow water to touch their body. The Dry fast is a natural phenomenon practiced by animals, where they heal themselves by observing the regimen for days at a time when they feel sick.

**Soft Dry Fast:** Which is preferred by beginners, fast for longer periods but this allows drinking water during the fast. The time period depends on the capability of the individual to observe and withstand long periods without food.

**Alternate day fasting:** A “fast” day where individuals consume 25% of energy needs, alternating with a feed day. A “feed” day is alternated with a “fast” day.

**Modified fasting regimens:** Allows consumption of 20 - 25% of energy needs on such fasting days. This is the basis for the popular 5:2 diet. It involves severe energy restriction for two non-consecutive days per week. The other five days are feed days.

**Time restricted feeding:** Allows normal energy intake within specific time frame followed by extended fasting intervals. For e.g. some eat from 6 am to 6 pm and fast the next 2 hours from 6 pm to 6 am. This is a time tested way of eating in some cultures and Jainism has followed this regimen for centuries with many beneficial effects.

Having a restricted feeding time or following any one of the above regimen has immense health benefits on an individual's health. It includes:

- Improvement in gut health
- Prevention of obesity
- Defense against Type 2 DM
- Prevents Neuro degeneration
- Lowers incidence of Cardio vascular disease and Cancer
- Decrease oxidative damage
- Increase Neuro plasticity of the brain
- Forms new synapses crucial to learning
- Decreases risk factors associated with multiple age related diseases.

There are many more physiological, metabolic and molecular benefits. The best way to adhere is to follow calorie restriction with optimal nutrition. There are some who should not follow these regimens such as diabetics, people with digestive disorders, adolescents, pregnant women etc. Bottom line- following any one of these regimens only under medical advice or consulting a qualified dietitian is the wise decision and a right step forward to optimal health.

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