

The benefits of fasting: more energy, a longer life

By Shari Roan
Los Angeles Times

Something about the way Americans eat isn't working and hasn't been for a long time. The number of obese Americans is now greater than the number who are merely overweight, according to government figures released in January. It's as if once we taste food, we can't stop until we've gorged ourselves.

Taking that inclination into account, some people are adopting an unusual solution to overeating. Rather than battling temptation in grocery stores, restaurants and their own kitchens, they simply don't eat. At least not at certain times of the day or specific days of the week.

Called intermittent fasting, this rather stark approach to weight control appears to be supported by science, not to mention various religious and cultural practices around the globe. The practice is a way to become more circumspect about food, its adherents say. But it also seems to yield the benefits of calorie restriction, which may ultimately reduce the risk of some diseases and even extend life. Some fasters, in fact, ultimately switch from regular, if comparatively rare, periods of hunger to permanent deprivation. They limit calories all the time.

"There is something kind of magical about starvation," says Dr. Marc Hellerstein, a professor of endocrinology, metabolism and nutrition at the University of California at Berkeley, who studies fasting.

Add Mark P. Mattson, chief of the laboratory of neurosciences at the National Institute on Aging. "In normal health subjects, moderate fasting—maybe one day a week or cutting back on calories a couple of days a week—will have health benefits for most anybody," Mattson says.

Leading researchers on the effects of calorie restriction. "Not all nutrition professionals see the merits of fasting. Some think of it as a recipe for disaster, setting up a person for binge eating and metabolic confusion."

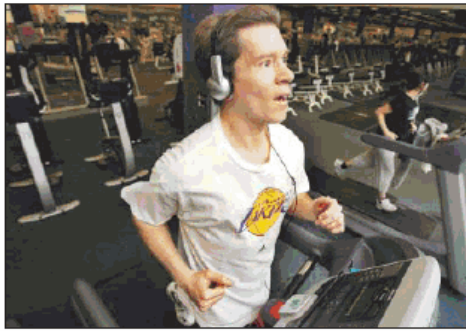
Ruth Frechman, a registered dietitian in Burbank, Calif., and spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association, says she frequently sees such extreme strategies backfire. "You're hungry, fatigued, irritable. Fasting is not very comfortable. People try to eat back one day, and the next day they're starving and they overeat." Researchers who study fasting and calorie restriction, however, say the body's hunger cycle ultimately adjusts.

From a biological standpoint, they say, fasting can be helpful whether someone is overweight or normal weight.

"We're brilliant at this," Hellerstein says, referring to humans' physical reaction to not eating. "We're not good at responding to too many calories, but we're very good at responding to fasting. Fasting, in itself, is not an unhealthy process." During fasting, almost every system in the body is "turned down," Hellerstein says. The body changes how it uses fuel. Certain hormone levels fall. Growth stops.

Reproduction becomes impossible. "By the end of three weeks of fasting, you are a completely different metabolic creature," he says.

"It affects many, many processes—but in a somewhat predictable way that takes you toward disease prevention." Put simply, intermittent fast-



Dan Golden began fasting almost 15 years ago and now eats about 1,800 to 2,000 calories a day on a diet high in fruits, vegetables, rice and beans. By Jan Khan, Los Angeles Times

Americans. Mormons typically don't smoke or drink alcohol, and some abstain from food on the first Sunday of every month. After controlling for several factors that protect against heart disease, the researchers found that only fasting made a significant difference in lowering the risk of heart disease. Among 448 people surveyed, intermittent fasting was associated with a more than 40 percent reduction in heart disease risk. Fasting also was linked to a lower incidence of diabetes. The study was published in October in the American Journal of Cardiology.

Another study showed that asthma patients who fasted had fewer symptoms, better airway function and a decrease in the markers of inflammation in the blood than those who didn't fast or restrict calories. The study was conducted because being overweight is known to worsen asthma symptoms. The study was published in 2007 in the journal Free Radical Biology & Medicine.

"They complied with the diet pretty well," Mattson says. "If people know that tomorrow they can eat whatever they want, today they can eat less." The National Institutes of Health is now supporting calorie-restriction research at three medical centers. At one study site, Washington University in St. Louis, Dr. Luigi Fontana is following the largest group to date of people who practice calorie restriction or intermittent fasting. So far his research shows that such people are not malnourished and have excellent cardiovascular health.

"Fasting less is important, because 65 percent of the American population is overweight," Fontana says. "But another question is: If you are already lean, should you change your diet to improve your health and possibly extend your lifespan?" That ultimately may be the strongest selling point of a reduced-calorie lifestyle.

"It does demand more than some other diets," says Joseph Cordell, D.O., a St. Louis lawyer who limits his intake to 1,800 to 2,000 calories a day.

"But surely the payoff is dramatically better than anything else. I feel so much better and have more energy. And there is this prospect of living so much longer than you otherwise would."

When we first heard that our reaction was, "That can't be right! Parents just instinctively think about their kids first and themselves second. Wouldn't it be more important to first get the mask on the kids?" But when you think through it, the airlines' recommendation makes perfect sense. They figured out that if you as the parent aren't getting enough oxygen, there's no way you can help your kids. Put the mask on yourself first and your body will get the oxygen it needs. That way you can help not only your kids, but maybe others on the plane, too.

This is a terrific parable

Book Dan Polimino to speak at your next meeting or event today. For program information contact us at info@BookDan.com, visit www.BookDan.com or call 303-623-4795.

How many calories do you need?

Daily calorie consumption has increased among American adults, from an average of 2,296 per day in 1990 to an average of 2,757 in 2005, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The number of calories needed each day to maintain weight varies according to age, gender and activity level. A calorie calculator to individualize your intake can be found on the USDA Web site MyPyramid.gov. Here are some general calorie consumption recommendations from the USDA:

ACTIVE WOMEN:	SEDENTARY WOMEN:
Ages 19-30: 2,400	Ages 19-30: 2,000
Ages 31-50: 2,200	Ages 31-50: 1,800
Ages 51 or older: 2,200	Ages 51 or older: 1,600
ACTIVE MEN:	SEDENTARY MEN:
Ages 19-30: 3,000	Ages 19-30: 2,400
Ages 31-50: 3,000	Ages 31-50: 2,300
Ages 51 or older: 2,800	Ages 51 or older: 2,000

Active is defined as a lifestyle that includes physical activity equivalent to walking more than three miles a day at 3 to 4 miles per hour in addition to the light physical activity associated with typical day-to-day life. Los Angeles Times

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Have you ever been on an airplane and heard the flight attendant announce the following? "Should there be a loss in cabin pressure oxygen masks will drop from the ceiling. Please place the mask over your nose and mouth first before helping your children or someone else."

describing how parents sacrifice their own health for not only their kids, but for many other reasons as well. How about you? Do you skip daily exercise, healthy nutrition and stress relief because you think you're doing more good by devoting every extra minute to your children, husband, church or some other worthy cause? The problem is that pretty soon you'll run out of gas and you can't help anyone else. If you aren't taking care of yourself first, how can you take care of others?

As fitness experts we talk to oxygen-deprived people day after day. They're overweight, sapped of energy, depressed or plagued with a variety of problems. Our advice to them? Put on your oxygen mask. Make a commitment to take care of yourself so you can be a better parent in the future. Before long you'll not only look better, but you'll also feel better. And you'll be better able to help the people that matter most in your life.

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