



Gut health & intermittent fasting

What is intermittent fasting?

Fasting is the act of refraining from food, and sometimes beverages, for a specific period of time. For thousands of years, many civilizations have practiced fasting for religious, cultural, political, health, and other reasons. Intermittent fasting (IF), on the other hand, involves following an eating plan that alternates between fasting and eating. IF is primarily used for weight loss and some other health reasons. It has gained popularity in the 21st century, especially with the rise of social media.

There are several types of intermittent fasting. Alternate day fasting involves eating what you want every other day and consuming no more than 25% of your required calories (e.g., 500 calories if you maintain your weight at 2,000 calories) on the days in between. Periodic fasting involves longer stretches of fasting, the most common being the 5:2 method, in which you eat normally for 5 days followed by 2 days of approximately 25% of your daily intake (e.g., 5 days of eating 2000 calories followed by 2 days of 500 calories). Time restricted feeding involves only eating during a certain time period and fasting the rest of the day. Common versions include the 16:8 method, which involves fasting for 16 hours and eating for 8 hours (e.g., only eating between noon and 8 pm) as well as a type that involves eating just one meal a day (OMAD), usually within one hour, and fasting for the remaining twenty-three hours (e.g., only eating between 5 pm and 6 pm).

Unlike most diets, IF focuses on when to eat rather than what to eat.

There are situations in which IF can potentially improve gut health, but in others we need to use caution before suggesting IF as an effective intervention for those living with gastrointestinal conditions.

Can fasting benefit the gut?

The evidence is unclear, as a few studies have shown associations between intermittent fasting and increased microbiota diversity,^[i] a key factor in a healthy gut, while others show no benefit.

Some individuals claim improved digestive function and reduced gastrointestinal symptoms while practicing one of the fasting methods listed above. While it's not known exactly why, there are reasonable explanations. One might be that fasting promotes the preparation of more balanced meals to promote satiety until the next meal. Another explanation could be that there is less opportunity for snacking on potential gut irritant or trigger foods that cause stomach upset. Lastly, the fasted periods might activate the migrating motor complex.

The migrating motor complex (MMC) is a series of electrical waves that migrate throughout the gut to help keep it clean.^[ii] By sweeping the gut contents along, the MMC can help prevent things such as constipation or small intestinal bacterial overgrowth (SIBO). SIBO occurs when there is an excess of bacteria in the small intestine, causing symptoms such as abdominal pain, bloating, distension, gas, constipation, and/or diarrhea.^[iii] Allowing time for the MMC waves to cycle through the gut also reduces the chance of bacteria translocating up into the small intestine from the large intestine.

Use caution with fasting

Certain populations should avoid fasting and these include anyone who has an eating disorder or a history of disordered eating patterns, as it could promote restrictive behaviours and unhealthy associations with food. Children, athletes, and those who are pregnant or lactating all require a more constant intake of calories to grow and thrive, and fasting may pose a challenge in meeting their increased nutritional needs.

Any form of fasting could make it challenging to consume adequate fibre. A lack of fibre can make it difficult to adequately feed your gut microbiota and increase the risk of constipation.

It's common for those who have irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) to become symptomatic when they consume large volumes of food at once. Fasting could lead to large volumes consumed at once, since individuals are typically quite hungry when they finally reach their eating window. This might result in abdominal pain or bloating.

The research for inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) is also conflicting, as some studies show worsening of IBD with fasting,^[i] while others show improvement.^[ii] Eating well, meeting nutrient needs, and building up nutrient stores are important while in remission. Preventing malnutrition, reducing inflammation, and allowing for mucosal healing are important focuses during a flare. If any of these goals aren't achievable while fasting, then intermittent fasting is not the correct dietary approach for you.