

A top-down view of a healthy meal on a white plate. The meal includes a piece of salmon, a hard-boiled egg, avocado, tomatoes, broccoli, cucumber, and cheese. Surrounding the plate are various fresh ingredients: a whole apple, blueberries, almonds, walnuts, and other nuts. A glass of water is visible in the bottom left corner.

ONE  
SMALL  
CHANGE

# EMBRACE INTERMITTENT FASTING

It may not be just what you eat but when you eat it.  
Can fasting really change your health for the better?



**F**asting isn't new. Our hunter-gatherer ancestors often went for extended periods without food, albeit out of necessity rather than choice. In ancient times, various cultures thought fasting could help heal the body – and, of course, there's a spiritual side. People of many religions believe that periods of fasting deepen connection to their faith.

Recently, interest in 'intermittent fasting' (alternative periods of eating and abstinence) has rocketed. The 5:2 diet, in which you eat 'normally' for five days a week but limit calorie intake on two, was popularised by Dr Michael Mosley after a 2012 BBC documentary. Since then, other approaches have also gained traction – including 'time-restricted eating' (TRE).

The principle of TRE is that many of us eat from early in the morning to late at night, with our 'eating window' often spanning 14 hours or longer. Researchers say that eating this way – even if you're a healthy weight – could put your health at risk.

"Regularly eating late at night has a knock-on effect on our metabolic health, sleep quality, hunger and food choices the next day," explains Dr Sarah Berry, chief scientist at personalised-nutrition company ZOE. Long term, this may lead to increased inflammation in the body and a greater risk of obesity, type-2 diabetes and insulin resistance.

Sarah believes most of us would benefit from having breakfast and dinner at roughly the same time every day, within a 10-12-hour window. The idea is to give our digestive system a 'rest' – time to shift its focus away from digestion and onto functions such as repair. "If you don't have a large enough gap between the last meal of the day and the first meal of the next, your blood fat levels may be permanently elevated. This causes inflammation, which can increase the risk of poor health in the long term," she says.

While TRE isn't specifically for weight loss, a 2020 review found that people who limited their eating window lost 0.8-13% of their body

weight over two to 12 months. "TRE naturally reduces your calorie intake, either because you're less hungry or have fewer opportunities to eat," explains registered dietitian Laura Clark. "As a weight-loss method, it's simple, easy to sustain and doesn't require you to eliminate foods or count calories."

Research points to other benefits, too. In a study published in the *British Journal of Nutrition*, people following the 16:8 diet (see right) saw a significant increase in the diversity of their microbiome, the trillions of bacteria and other microorganisms in the gut. "Giving your digestive system a break overnight allows the gut microbiome to recuperate. This results in a healthier gut and immune system," says Sarah.

The largest study on intermittent fasting to date is ZOE's 2022 Big IF Study. It found those who reduced their eating window to 10 hours a day had increased energy levels, improved mood, less bloating and decreased hunger, particularly if the window for meals was consistent each day.

If you want to give it a go, start with a generous window, such as 12 hours. Then try extending the fasting segment by an hour or two, to eat within 10 hours and fast for 14.

TRE may not work for all. "While the Big IF Study found that, on average, people had

more energy, not everyone will experience the same effects. Some might have low energy and difficulty concentrating, while others report an increase in headaches," explains Sarah. TRE is not recommended for those trying to conceive, pregnant or breastfeeding women, people with type 1 diabetes or anyone with a history of disordered eating. Check with your GP first, particularly if you take medication with food. For others, shortening the eating window isn't practical, as Laura explains: "It can be difficult to practise time-restricted eating with a family, or when you work later in the evening."

One note of caution: eating windows aren't a free pass to eating junk food galore between these hours – a healthy, balanced diet with plenty of protein and plant foods will always be key to maintaining energy.

*Health writer Anita Bean is a registered nutritionist specialising in sports nutrition. She has worked with the London Marathon and is the author of The Vegan Athlete's Cookbook and The Runner's Cookbook.*

## 'THE IDEA IS TO GIVE OUR DIGESTIVE SYSTEM A REST'

### TIMING IS EVERYTHING...

*Time-restricted eating (TRE) in numbers*

#### THE 5:2 DIET

You limit calorie intake to 500-800 per day on two days each week.

#### THE 16:8/14:10 DIET

Eat within an eight- or 10-hour window, fasting for the remaining 16 or 14 hours.

#### REMEMBER

TRE is not recommended for people with type 1 diabetes, those trying to conceive, pregnant or breastfeeding women, or anyone with a history of disordered eating. Check with your GP before starting a new eating plan.

