

What to Expect on Your First Fast

Answers to the most commonly-asked questions

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INTRODUCTION: Fasting has been an integral part of Natural Hygiene care for more than 100 years. Many thousands of people have restored their health through fasting. Some, ill and distraught from years of discomfort and discouragement, try fasting as a last resort.

Some of the conditions that respond well to fasting and aggressive dietary changes after the fast are headache, rheumatoid arthritis, asthma, heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, colitis, psoriasis, lupus, and uterine fibroids. Fasting to heal oneself can mean the difference between living life pain-ridden and dependent on drugs, going from one doctor to another for relief and living a normal, pain-free existence into old age.

If you have never fasted before, you undoubtedly have many questions about it. Perhaps you have read a book about fasting, and you are hopeful that fasting will help you overcome a particular problem and improve your general health.

But since fasting is not yet a regular part of medical practice, it may be difficult for you to seriously consider it. This is unfortunate because fasting can have a powerful effect in reversing pathology and establishing a foundation for health. Fasting is not an all-encompassing solution to every health problem, but it has great promise to bolster the recovery process for many ailing people.

In order to make an intelligent decision about fasting, you need reliable information that is accurate, factual, and scientific. It is good to talk to people who have fasted and to doctors who are experienced in the use of fasting. Dr. Herbert Shelton (1895-1985), who was one of the founders of the American Natural Hygiene Society, probably had more experience with fasting than anyone else who ever lived. It is estimated that he supervised more than 40,000 fasts. Dr. Shelton used to say that "the most vehement objections to fasting are made by those who have never missed a meal in their lives."

Think twice before accepting condemnations of fasting from those who know nothing about it and have no experience with it, whether they are physicians or lay persons. If you objectively look at the evidence about fasting, you will see that it has improved health and life for countless people under a broad range of circumstances.

Benefits of fasting

The first question you might ask "Why should I fast?" A thorough answer to that question could comprise an entire book. The short answer is that fasting helps the body to normalize and optimize itself.

Think about what happens when you go to sleep at night. Your body immediately goes about the tasks of repair and recovery (as much as possible) from the wear and tear of the day's activities. A renovation takes place in your brain and throughout your entire body that enables you to arise refreshed and raring to go the next day. The restorative power of a night's sleep involves many factors, and the process is not completely understood. But one factor that definitely helps facilitate this process of rejuvenation is your nightly fast. While you are sleeping each night, you are not eating—you are not adding to your body's digestive work. This period of digestive rest allows your body to devote more of its energy to its nightly restoration.

You probably know from experience that eating a heavy meal late at night interferes with the quality of your sleep and leaves you feeling groggy the next day. Heavy eating late at night, much like heavy drinking late at night, can leave you with a hangover.

Abstinence from food at night facilitates the process of biological renewal, allowing your body to proceed with its repairs and restorations. Of course, one does not remain asleep throughout a fast, but when fasting is combined with rest, your body treats it as an extended period of renovation and renewal.

During fasting, your senses become more acute, including taste, smell, and hearing. Even sight has been known to improve during a fast, although that does not always happen.

Balance and stability

Most people are familiar with the term homeostasis, which refers to the body's balancing, centering, and

stabilizing mechanisms. Homeostatic mechanisms are what enable your body to adjust to the relentless changes in your external and internal environments.

It is easier for your body to maintain homeostasis when you are resting and fasting than when you are eating and engaging in activity. The conservation of energy during such a profound period of rest creates a favorable condition for the biological process of healing. The human body is programmed to always seek normality, and a properly conducted fast supports and encourages that process.

Absence of hunger

Your next question might very well be, "Won't I be hungry all the time when I am fasting?" The surprising fact is that after one or a few days of fasting, most people experience little or no desire for food.

The desire to eat is dictated by a combination of physiological and psychological factors. It is thought that hunger is triggered by the activity of certain brain cells within the "appetite center" of the hypothalamus which respond to the blood glucose level.

During fasting, the body begins to burn fat as a fuel, and the appetite center becomes temporarily desensitized to blood glucose. This makes it possible to fast without a gnawing hunger.

Most people report little desire for food while fasting. They do not have a powerful, overwhelming urge to eat. This helps make it possible for most people to fast comfortably for several weeks or longer.

Psychological factors

It is important to recognize that psychological factors can affect people differently during fasting. Some people have a habit of thinking and talking about food much of the time — whether they are hungry or not. Some people even dream about food while fasting. But most people experience little or no psychological discomfort about not eating for a period of time. Some even enjoy the feeling of lightness and freedom they get while fasting. Do not assume that you will feel like you are "starving" because you won't be starving. You will be fasting.

Fasting, not starving

There is an important difference between fasting and starving. Fasting is a period of abstinence from food during which the body's nutrient reserves are adequate to meet the body's nutritional needs. Starvation can occur only if you abstain from food beyond the point where you have sufficient nutrient reserves.

The differences between fasting and starving are unmistakable to the trained eye, and that is why it is important that you fast under the supervision of a health professional who is trained and experienced in fasting supervision.

Will I experience discomfort?

While fasting, everyone tends to experience some "locomotor weakness," which refers to the withdrawal of energy from the muscular system as the body tries to conserve energy. Sometimes it is surprisingly mild. Some people fast for two weeks without becoming discernibly weak. They move about as easily as they did before they began their fasts.

In general, those who are large and heavy tend to remain more energetic than those who are small and light. The body enforces an earlier slowdown of caloric expenditure in those who have the least reserves. Thin people can become weak rather early in a fast. Interestingly, women tend to hold up better energy-wise while fasting than do men. I presume it is because women tend to have greater fat reserves, on average, but hormonal factors also may be involved.

Symptoms may arise during fasting, such as headaches, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and skin eruptions. These all are related to the increase in your body's eliminative activities during the fast, and they are considered to be constructive. Dr. Shelton used the term "orthopathic," which means "right suffering," to describe these events. Nevertheless, they can be uncomfortable and distressing.

The vast majority of people are able to fast for a sufficient period of time without major discomfort. The most frequent complaint I hear from people who are fasting is that they are bored. However, there are instances when a situation arises that may necessitate terminating the fast. That is why it is important that you fast under the supervision of a physician trained in fasting supervision.

Low blood pressure

Blood pressure tends to drop during a fast, which is a good thing if your pressure is too high. But if you have normal or low blood pressure, this further drop in blood pressure during fasting can occasion orthostatic hypotension—a sudden feeling of weakness and lightheadedness that occurs when you try to stand up too quickly. While fasting, you must be careful to move around slowly in order to give your body time to adjust to different postures.

There are special receptors in the neck called baroreceptors which regulate the blood pressure to the brain. These baroreceptors tend to respond more slowly during fasting; they take longer to read conditions and elicit a response. People have been known to faint while fasting, but the only danger in fainting is that you may hit your head on something hard or sharp as you fall down. The way to prevent such a mishap is to be slow and careful each and every time you shift positions during fasting. Pause between postures to give your body time to adjust to the effects of gravity.

Sometimes it is necessary to end a fast because of low blood pressure. How low you can allow your blood pressure to drop during fasting before terminating a fast depends upon what your blood pressure was originally, and your size, age, sex, and other factors. An experienced physician can make that evaluation.

A good and safe experience

To maximize the benefits from fasting and ensure your safety, obtain professional supervision from a trained and experienced fasting health care professional. Fasting beyond several days requires professional supervision in order to be safe.

Moreover, there are some fragile and delicate individuals for whom even one day of fasting would be ill-advised without a fasting doctor's approval and supervision. Stability is achieved during fasting because of adaptations the body makes, and individuals vary at how well they make those adaptations.

As I mentioned, the biggest complaint I hear from people who are fasting is that they are bored. Here is where mental discipline can be a major factor. No one will deny that it can be mentally challenging to lie around fasting day after day. But, if you take it just one day at a time (and don't decide ahead of time how many days you will fast), you can get through your first fast without too much difficulty.