- Fasting



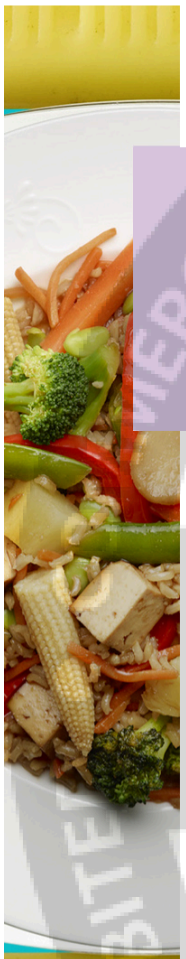
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5 MYTHS ABOUT

INTERMITTENT FASTING

Is restricting your food intake to certain hours or days the golden ticket to weight loss and longevity some say it is? Here, the true-or-false ticktock of eating by the clock.

BY KATE ROCKWOOD



LEVI BROWN/TRUNK ARCHIVE.

1

MYTH:

Intermittent fasting is not safe long term.

MYTHBUSTER

Many people can safely do intermittent fasting (IF) for at least a year, says Krista Varady, Ph.D., a professor of nutrition at the UIC College of Applied Health Sciences. People who should steer clear: pregnant and breastfeeding women and folks with certain health issues such as kidney stones or a history of disordered eating, as IF can trigger obsessive behaviors and rekindle eating disorders. Popular types of IF include eating within a certain window of time each day, e.g., fasting for 16 hours and eating during eight. Then there's alternate-day fasting—for example, the 5:2 plan, in which you eat regularly five days a week and eat just one 500- to 600-calorie meal on the other two days. Whatever pattern you choose, the key is ensuring that you get enough food volume and variety to meet your daily needs for nutrients like calcium, iron, and vitamin D, says Scott Keatley, R.D.N., owner of Keatley Medical Nutrition Therapy in New York City—and always talk to your doctor before starting.

2

MYTH:

Fasting wrecks your metabolism.

MYTHBUSTER

Fasting may lower your metabolism, but no more than other diets. "Whenever someone loses weight, their metabolic rate—the number of calories they burn per day—goes down slightly," Varady says. That's because metabolic rate is related to body size, she adds. In general, when you lose weight, 20% to 30% of the loss is muscle mass. Muscle loss can slow down your metabolism because the more lean muscle you have, the more calories you burn when at rest. To help keep your metabolism from taking a dip, strength-train two to three times a week and eat enough protein, Keatley says.

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3

MYTH:

Intermittent fasting is the best way to lose weight.

MYTHBUSTER

Changing when you eat doesn't automatically lead to weight loss—any weight-loss diet needs to result in your eating fewer calories overall, and some people react to restriction of their food intake by overdoing it on the days they allow themselves to eat. IF is not necessarily a superior way to lose either: A study Varady conducted found that people who did IF lost about the same amount of weight as those who restricted calories, typically 3% to 10% of their body weight after three to 12 months of intermittent fasting, she says. The best diet is one you can stick to; IF may be appealing because it can help you eat fewer calories without feeling as deprived as you otherwise might, and research suggests that it may be easier not to eat at certain times or on certain days than it is to count calories.

4

MYTH:

IF helps you live longer.

MYTHBUSTER

The science doesn't back this up—at least not yet. Some research on animals suggests that a calorie-restricted or time-restricted diet leads to a 3% longer life span, indicating that IF may improve health and longevity in some animals, Keatley says. But despite decades of such findings in animals, scientists still don't know whether the number of calories, the duration of the eating window, or some combination explains the findings. So while "some research shows potential benefits for metabolic health, inflammation, and cell repair processes in humans," Keatley says, more studies are needed to see whether IF helps people live longer. What is clear, though, is that whether you're fasting or not, a healthy diet will help—a U.K. study estimated that going from an unhealthy diet to a healthy one with less red meat and sugary beverages and more whole grains, produce, and nuts could add up to 10 years to people's life expectancy.

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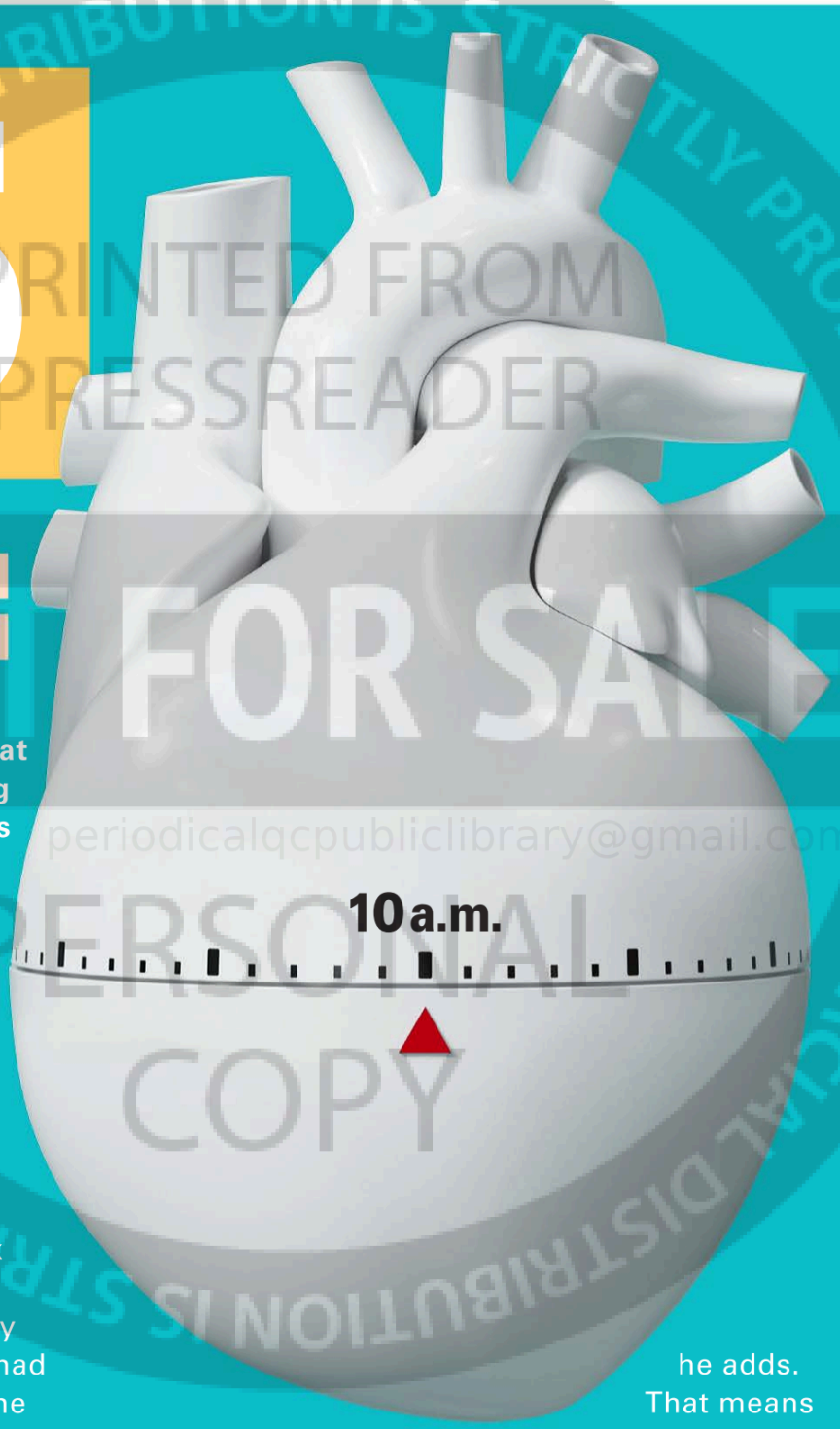
5

MYTH:

Fasting is bad for your heart.

MYTHBUSTER

Research shows that intermittent fasting can improve factors that affect heart health such as cholesterol levels, blood pressure, and insulin sensitivity. But what about headlines earlier this year that suggested IF was linked to a 91% increase in risk of death from heart disease? Experts say the study involved had many limitations: The fasting folks were more likely to smoke; also, the study was based on self-reported information, and the researchers didn't evaluate the nutritional quality of the food people were eating. Whether IF is good for your heart depends on how you fast, what you eat, and how healthy you are to start with, Keatley says. You also must properly manage your fasting, he adds. That means getting enough potassium and magnesium, which are crucial for proper heart function, and not risking loss of muscle tissue by remaining in a calorie deficit for too long.



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