

Spotlight

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POPULAR CHOICE

American talk show host Jimmy Kimmel revealed in 2015 that he lost 25 pounds as a result of intermittent fasting. His choice of plan was 5:2, which means eating normally for five days and consuming fewer than 500 calories a day on the remaining two days

ISHAARORA

FOR 45-YEAR-OLD PRIYA GUBBI (name changed on request), a Mangalore-based teacher, intermittent fasting is no more a regime that she has to consciously practise or adhere to. It has become a way of life, she says, after barely two months of taking up the practice to get fitter, healthier and develop holistically. "I fasted for the first time in November, and even though I hadn't eaten anything the whole day, my energy levels were surprisingly high," Gubbi says. "I didn't get my usual cravings for coffee after a few days and my body instantly started feeling lighter," she adds.

The decision to take up intermittent fasting didn't come easily to her. After nearly six years of neglect prompted by strain in her feet caused by plantar fasciitis (a condition that leads to stabbing pains felt in the heel), she found a way to reclaim her lost energy. "Because of my health conditions, I couldn't walk too much, which led me to put on almost 12 kg extra weight... it restricted my movement. Once lethargy set in, my general well-being took a hit. I went from being a bubbly person to a grumpy one," Gubbi recalls. However, the tables soon turned for her and she started fasting intermittently after seeing videos about it on the internet. "I can now go up to 20 hours without eating and without feeling any dip in my energy levels," she says. The key lies in listening to the body, she says. "I eat when I am hungry... I even have a chocolate sometimes if I feel like it... I am not putting my body under any stress," she says.

The practice of intermittent fasting, as the name suggests, involves eating during a certain number of hours in a day and fasting the rest of the time. Fasting has for long been practised in all religions, from Hinduism and Christianity to Islam, Jainism and Judaism. It was devised as a way to cleanse the body on a physical level, so that one could grow emotionally, mentally and spiritually. However, with convenience foods becoming mainstream, people over the years have been indulging in unhealthy food during the window set for consumption during fasting.

However, fasting is now being looked at as a fitness tool, practised not only for religious reasons, but also for a healthier lifestyle. "This is one of the most natural ways of eating that our ancestors used to abide by... with lack of electricity during older times, the last meal used to be consumed before it got dark and the first meal would be consumed after sunrise, which left a gap of anywhere between 14-16 hours," says Mumbai-based Luke Coutinho, a holistic lifestyle coach who practices in the field of integrative medicine. "Ideally, we should continue to eat this way because even though humans have evolved, our circadian rhythm and the biological clock haven't," he adds.

Gaining traction

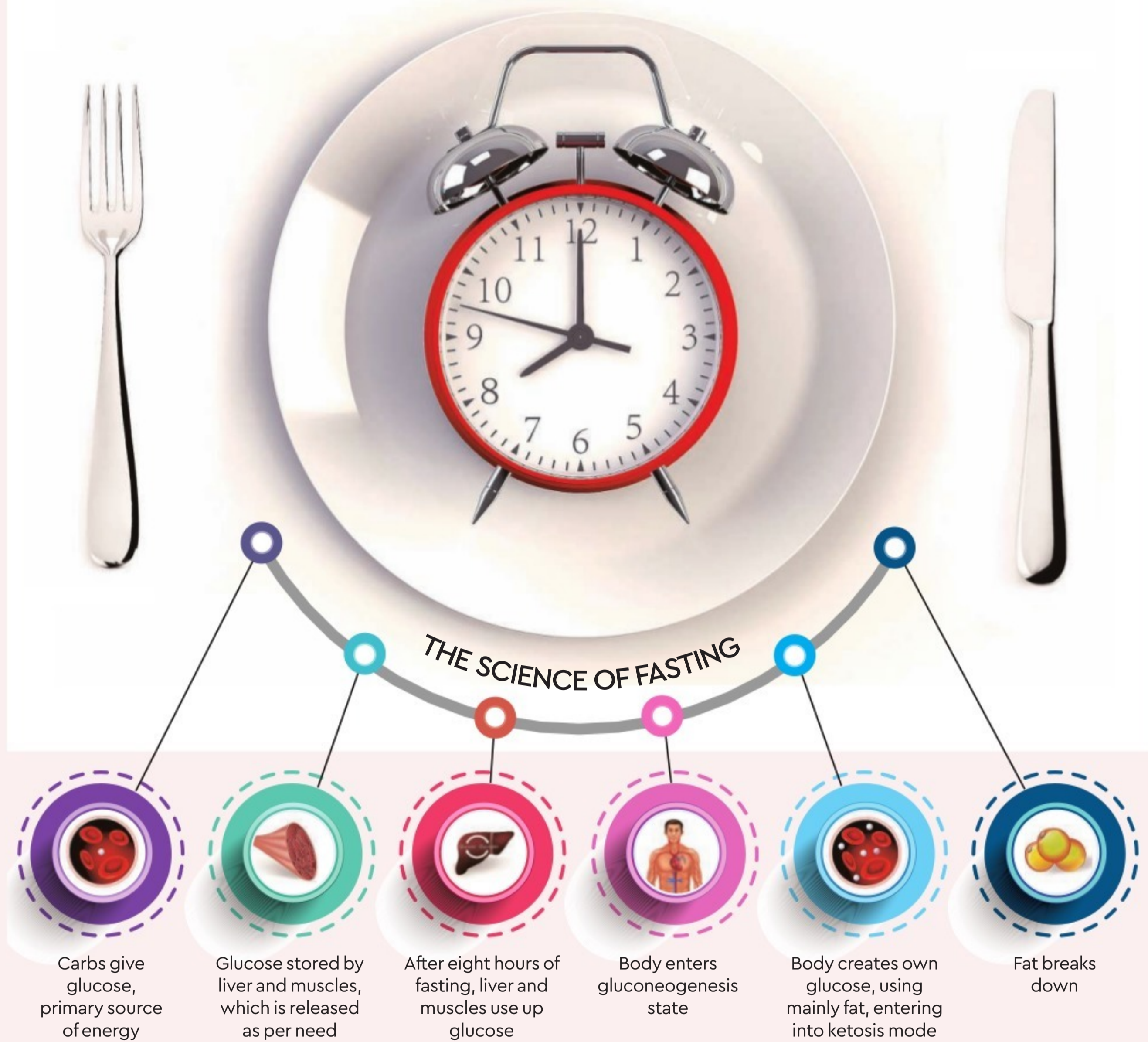
Google searches for intermittent fasting as a way to lose weight have gone up by 400% in India in the past 12 months. Searches for intermittent fasting have also outranked dieting fads like Atkins and paleo in most parts of the country in the last one year. However, in comparison to searches for keto, intermittent fasting as a trend still fares low, even though Hollywood celebrities such as Jimmy Kimmel, Hugh Jackman, Kourtney Kardashian and makeup maven Bobbi Brown have been revealed to swear by it to lose weight and keep fit. "In early 2017, nobody was talking about intermittent fasting and I was hardly ever asked about it by people seeking consultancy. However, over the past one year, the number has increased significantly. Now, I get at least one-two people a week coming up to me and asking about it... and wanting to know if they can practise it," says Delhi-based Kavita Devgan, a weight management consultant and author of the book *Ultimate Grandmother Hacks*.

The number of queries that Coutinho gets about intermittent fasting has also risen. "Initially, when we would talk about the practice of fasting or put out videos about it, people were sceptical. But the second half of 2018 was a game-changer for sure. We now get about 10-12 queries a week about intermittent fasting," he says.

Research carried out at the University of Adelaide in Australia, published in the journal *Obesity* earlier this month, revealed that obese women lost more weight and improved their health by fasting intermittently while following a strictly controlled diet. The study involved a sample of 88 women following carefully-controlled diets for over 10 weeks. The women were

THE FAST LANE

Move over Atkins, keto and paleo. Intermittent fasting, which has long been practised in India and was devised as a way to cleanse the body, is slowly becoming the new wellness rage, with nutritionists and dietitians swearing by its myriad health benefits



aged between 35 and 70 years and had a body mass index in the 25-40 range. "Obese women who followed a diet in which they ate 70% of their required energy intake and fasted intermittently lost the most weight," wrote Amy Hutchinson, lead author from University of Adelaide and South Australian Health and Medical Research Institute, in the journal. "Other women in the study—who either fasted intermittently without reducing their food intake, who reduced their food intake, but did not fast; or did not restrict their diet at all—were not as successful in losing weight," she added.

Right way

After about eight hours of fasting, the liver and muscles, which store glucose (the primary source of energy), use the last of their glucose reserves, leading the body to enter into the gluconeogenesis state. After that, with no carbohydrates coming in by extended fasting, the body creates its own glucose, using mainly fat, entering into a ketosis mode. A 2009 study by *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* revealed that gluconeogenesis increases the number of calories the body burns. With most carbohydrates and fats burnt during fasting, the body automatically detoxifies.

However, unlike most diet regimes that restrict a person in terms of their calorie, carbohydrate and fat intake, intermittent fasting allows individuals to have a balanced diet rich in nutrition but in regulated amounts. There is no rule book on what kind of diet people should adhere to while fasting intermittently, but nutritionists and experts recommend consuming food

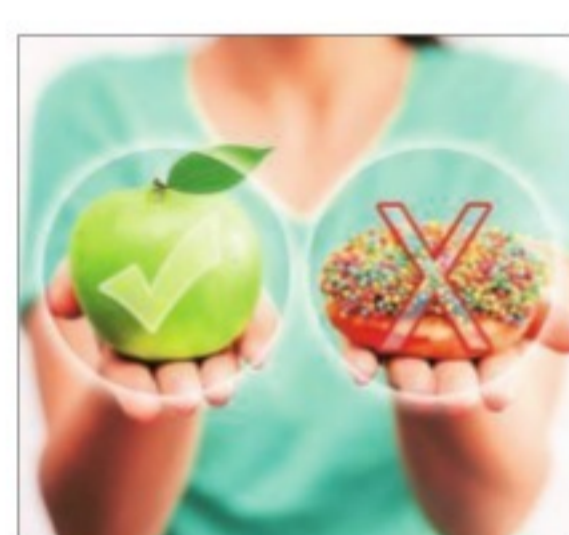
INTERMITTENT FASTING GUIDE

- Feasting to fasting ratio can be observed in different ways— 12:12 (eating for 12 hours, fasting for the remaining); 16:8 (eating for 16 hours, fasting for the rest); or fasting on alternate days
- No rule book on time window of fasting or feasting
- A balanced diet, which is easy to digest, is most recommended
- Fried food is a strict no-no

that is light and easy to digest. "One should go for options like cereals, lentils, milk and milk products, and more of complex carbohydrates, with a good amount of protein and fat, as that will have a slow release of glucose in the blood, which will provide energy for long hours in the fasting period," says Siddhant Bhargava, co-founder, Food Darzee, a Mumbai-based healthy tiffin box delivery company.

Also, since the focus is on cleansing the body, water and fluid intake must be increased too. "The whole idea is to make your body efficient, so you should have a lot of water... this way, the cleansing and flushing of toxins can happen on their own," says weight management consultant Devgan.

Another important facet of intermittent fasting is that it leaves the duration of fasting to the individual's discretion. One can begin by fasting for 12 hours and eating for the remaining 12, and then move to a 16-hour fasting window, and eventually



observe fast on alternate days. "That's all that the body needs... But if one starts doing it for weeks, then the body will get used to it... that way, intermittent fasting ends up becoming just another type of diet fad," says Devgan.

Worst mistakes

Since the body gets rid of all the energy-deriving sources while fasting, eating right after fasting is very essential. The practice of eating fried food in the form of chips, potatoes and eating anything and everything in the window available for consumption is catastrophic, as per experts. "Common fasting items like fried *puris*, potatoes, *papads*, tapioca are the worst things to have during fasting, as fried foods make our digestive system and body even more sluggish," says holistic lifestyle coach Coutinho. These items should be replaced with fruits, vegetable juices, *khichdi*, fer-

mented sprouts, etc, say experts.

A lot of people also happen to ingest coffee or tea as soon as they're done fasting, but that's harmful too. Binge-eating in the window reserved for consumption is another no-no, as per nutritionists. "Fasting followed by feasting is the worst mistake... it leads to an insulin rush and carb loading," says Priyanka Rohatgi, chief clinical dietician, Apollo Hospitals, Bengaluru.

Beyond weight loss

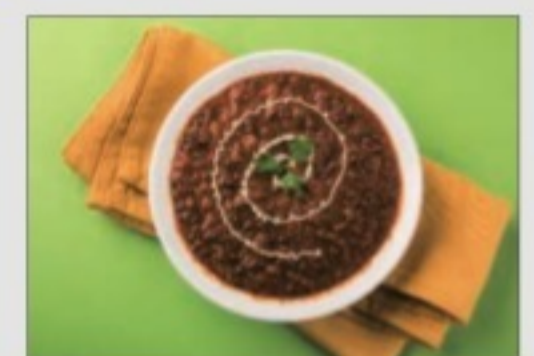
Experts say fasting has more to do with gaining health than losing weight and is, therefore, recommended over dieting fads like keto, Atkins, paleo, etc. With intermittent fasting, one is not advised to remove any food group, stick to any specific time window or follow any nutritional chart. "Any diet that removes any food group from the diet is not recommended. This is why I like intermittent fasting because in it you can eat everything that is nutritious," says Delhi-based Devgan. "It's not really a diet, but a lifestyle choice, and weight loss in the process of gaining health is just a positive byproduct," she adds.

Since the body undergoes a process of detoxification, healing, recovery and enhanced concentration occurs by side. Intermittent fasting is also believed to entail a variety of health benefits like boosting immunity and treating issues like disturbed sleep cycle, to even grave concerns like tumours, fibroids, etc. "Cell stress response gets improved, resistance against diseases is enhanced, insulin sensitivity among the overweight is improved and oxidative inflammation and stress are reduced, etc," says Rohatgi.

RECENT DIET FADS



Keto diet eliminates major macro-nutrient—carbohydrate—and all types of fruit. Originally designed to heal medical conditions like brain cancer, epilepsy, autism, etc, in supervised manner, it was soon picked up by the weight-loss industry



In **Atkins diet**, protein- and fat-generating food groups are retained, while carbohydrate intake is restricted to 20-25 gm. Due to this, the body enters into the ketosis state



In **paleo**, whole and unprocessed foods, including fruits, vegetables, healthy fats, etc, are considered fine for consumption, while all grains and most dairy and sugary products are deemed off-limits

DIET FOR PLANET

■ A recent report by *The Lancet* unveils an ideal diet for the health of the planet and its people

■ Says to double intake of nuts, fruits, vegetables & legumes; cut meat & sugar by 50%

■ Will prevent premature deaths, reduce greenhouse gases

Exercise caution

However, even with all its success, there are some concerns too. Since the body gets devoid of energy-deriving sources like carbohydrates and fats, female patients especially can experience hormonal imbalances, warns Rohatgi. "The female body manifests hormone issues... they can face fertility problems and nutrient deficiencies in many ways. Common side-effects of intermittent fasting are hair loss, pale skin, acne, weight gain on going back to routine, excess body hair and lack of energy," she says. "The long-term impact of fasting intermittently on metabolism, lean body muscle mass and energy level is something that needs to be looked into," she adds.

Another issue with intermittent fasting is that it's increasingly being taken up by people solely for the purpose of losing weight, with the health reason—for which it was, in fact, intended—taking a back seat. This obsession to lose weight can drive people to fast for longer than necessary and suffer bad health in the process. If not done in moderation, it can also take the form of drastic illnesses like anorexia and bulimia. Listening to the body and having a balanced diet at the end of the day is key, says weight management consultant Devgan.

Interestingly, when it comes to following diets, a universal piece of advice that experts give is to follow none in particular. "There is no perfect diet. Diets don't work not because they put too much stress on food choices, but because they aren't personalised and customised according to one's body, health and lifestyle," says holistic lifestyle coach Coutinho.



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—PRIYANKA ROHATGI, CHIEF CLINICAL DIETITIAN, APOLLO HOSPITALS, BENGALURU