

HEALTHY LIFESTYLES

Intermittent fasting: Worthwhile effort or pop culture nothingburger?

By SALLY BAHO

INTERMITTENT FASTING is a diet — meaning the way you eat, not just what you eat or don't — that involves alternating periods of eating with extended periods of very little or no calorie consumption. Most people write off fasting as a religious or ascetic

practice, not intended for the average person but rather for those living lives of self-discipline and abstinence. On top of all that, odds are good that as you're reading this, a culturally-sanctioned feast of turkey with all the fixings is in your future.

Research suggests that intermittent fasting can lead to weight loss and improved blood sugar levels, among other health benefits, and it's been touted in pop culture, as celebrities like Jimmy Kimmel and Jennifer Aniston found success with it. So, is

it the real deal or too good to be true?

The answer, unsurprisingly, is "it depends."

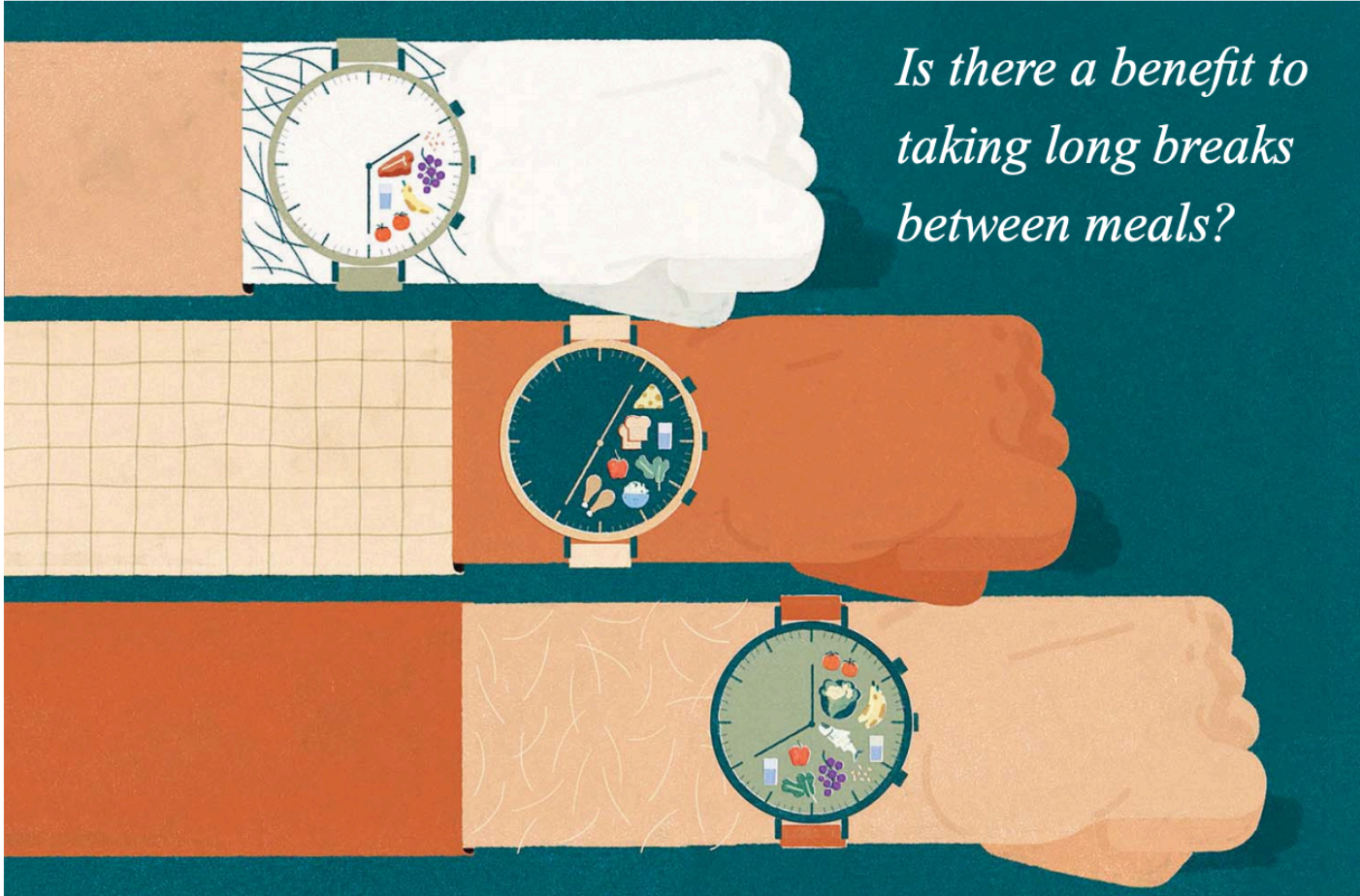
'Tool in the box'

Dr. Toby Katz, a Monterey gastroenterologist and specialist in obesity medicine said it's a valid approach to weight management, but that "safety is always the most important issue." He went on to say that pregnant or breastfeeding women, and people taking insulin for diabetes aren't good candidates. Those who have other conditions for which they take medications that make regular meals necessary for them shouldn't try it without asking their doctors. Other conditions like high blood pressure or kidney problems could also be aggravated by intermittent fasting. In other words, you need to be generally healthy, and having a physician's supervision is always a good idea.

Katz further cautioned that it's not a one-size-fits-all panacea, but rather one option that people can consider. "Intermittent fasting is an option that may be acceptable and successful dependent on a person's tolerance and preference. It's another tool in the box of healthy eating."

Burning fat

There are several intermittent fasting methods, such as the 5:2 diet where you limit your intake to 400



Is there a benefit to taking long breaks between meals?

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calories per day for two days, and eat normally on the other five days. Another popular technique involves restricting caloric consumption to a certain period of the day, say 11 a.m. to 7 p.m., with the goal of a minimum 16-hour fasting period. Happily, you'd likely sleep through about half of that.

The idea behind the system is that during the fasting period, your body begins to burn stored fat. Katz explained that in the modern world, we start eating earlier and continue eating later in the day than we did hundreds of years ago.

*Fasting isn't a
license to overdo
it or eat a lot of
junk food*

Instead of our food ingestion and insulin secretion happening over just eight hours, it's 12, 14 or 16. Flipping it back forces the body to switch from using glucose stored in the liver to breaking down fat stored in the body, a process called ketogenesis. (That term also pops up in low-carb regimens like Atkins.)

Not for everyone

Some small, short-term studies have attributed other health benefits to intermittent fasting, such as decreased inflammation, but those



Dr. Toby Katz

results were not well supported. Conversely, a study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association/Internal Medicine found that people who adopted the approach lost minimal weight and much of the weight they did lose was muscle, supporting Katz's assertion that intermittent fasting isn't for everyone.

Furthermore, restricting calorie consumption during a set window doesn't give you a free pass to eat whatever you want outside those hours. "You can still overeat in an eight-hour time-frame," Katz noted. The quality of the food is important, too, of course. And there is evidence that how you break your fast can make a big difference in how your body burns calories throughout the day.

Katz said, "If in your first meal of

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the day you eat a lower carb meal with good protein and good fat source, you're setting up your body to burn fat from the get-go." Good protein sources include eggs or nuts, the latter which also provides your body with a source of fiber beneficial to the gut microbiome.

White meats or grass-fed beef are OK (grass-fed has a lower fat content), but not processed meats such as sa-

lami, bacon or deli meats because of high salt content and preservatives. Good fats include avocados and olive oil.

Ultimately, you have to choose an eating approach that is effective for you and your lifestyle and is sustainable — you still want to enjoy your life. Katz stressed that if you want to lose weight you should eat mindfully and alter your relationship with food to eating mostly real food, as opposed to processed goodies and snacks.
