

EAT LIKE A MAN

THE WORLD'S MOST EFFECTIVE DIET

STOP EATING
FOR 36 HOURS
ONCE A WEEK—
AND YES,
YOU'LL DROP
A FEW POUNDS.

YOU MAY ALSO
PROTECT
YOURSELF
AGAINST
HEART DISEASE,
CANCER,
DIABETES,
AND STROKE.

TO TOP IT OFF,
YOU'LL ENJOY
THE FOOD YOU
DO EAT THAT
MUCH MORE.

MAYBE IT'S
TIME TO START
FASTING

BY SPEED WEED

M

Monday morning in Los Angeles. Skies are bright, air is clear, and as I walk my dogs down the street, I easily spy 10,000 calories. Commuters gobble PowerBars in traffic. The diner at the corner does brisk business. Two giant cheeseburgers hover over me on a billboard. But none for me, thanks.

I haven't eaten since Saturday night. Thirty-six hours. I'm not hungry. A bit spaced out, maybe, but in a peaceful way. This is maybe my 60th weekly fast in a row. I do this, honestly, because I love food. It's my favorite comfort, my most exquisite treat. I've forgone clothes, electronics, and a better car in order to budget more for braised beef ravioli, fresh mozzarella, and Château Rouget.

But a few years ago, something began to turn. Knowing the way food soothed me,

I started slipping—a shake from the diner, tangerine chicken from the local Chinese place. My eating became mechanical, joyless. This is an easy trap to fall into: From our hunter-gatherer ancestors, we retain a genetically encoded anxiety—however unconscious—that food can be scarce. So we're hard-wired to eat when we can, even though food is ubiquitous. It's also cheap and tasty.

For America, primal fear plus abundant food equals an obesity epidemic. For me, my love of food devolved into an imperative to eat that cared little for the distinction between fast food and foie gras. Apostasy. I committed to a year of weekly fasting to see if I could restore the relish to my life.

T

There are, it turns out, many reasons to fast. I was only vaguely aware of the health benefits when I started, but studies suggest that regularly abstaining from food lowers your heart rate and blood pressure, staves off diabetes, and protects your tissues from the ravages of free radicals.

"Fasting poses a good kind of stress, much like exercise," says Mark Mattson, Ph.D., a National

Institutes of Health neuroscientist. "Our cells respond by increasing their ability to cope with other, stronger stresses." In rodent studies, fasting also confers dramatic resistance to cancer, brain aging, stroke, and heart disease. Since I began this experiment, I've lost 15 pounds (from 189 to 174) and shaved two points from my body-mass index (from 25.6 to 23.6). More important, I love food again.

Fasting does, in fact, improve your tastebud sensitivity to sweet and salty flavors, according to a 2004 study in *BMC Neuroscience*. And fasting forces me to make better choices when I do eat. On either side of a fasting day, I crave smaller, more vegetal meals. Come midweek, I want to celebrate. I go for dry-aged steak and stinky cheese with less guilt and more gusto. And more patience. In practice, an empty gut brings a sense of peace, as if I'm on vacation. This calm, along with the promise of health, has kept me fasting beyond the year I initially committed to.

In the last hour of my fast this Monday morning, I feed my dogs, then my wife, then myself. Nothing tastes better than a sip of orange juice poured into that calm. And strawberries. Yum. Three of them and I'm full.

NEARLY A WEEK LATER, I'm ready again. Eager for it, really: my gustatory reset button. I typically fast from Saturday night until breakfast on Monday, drinking only water, only when I'm thirsty, and beginning and ending the fast with light meals. Tonight it's

kale, rice, chicken, and melon—a high-fiber selection. Last meals can lead to constipation if they don't contain enough fiber to push through your system. I read this in a book and confirmed its veracity by ignoring it.

That book, called *Celebration of Discipline*, by Richard Foster, is a guide to spiritual Christian practices. Tonight, I read the fasting chapter again. Foster's tone works for me. There's no histrionics—going without food is no big deal. This was critical for my first few fasts. When my inner food-child threw a tantrum, I responded with nonchalance, and it worked.

I didn't look beyond Foster for months, and I'm glad. Most fasting information out there is nonsense. Charlatans promote it as part of their weight-loss scams. Most doctors are equally as ignorant. When I asked one about it, he mumbled something about electrolytes and cardiac arrhythmias before surrendering: "They don't teach fasting in medical school."

They ought to, if only out of respect for the billions of people who fast for religious reasons, from Yom Kippur to various Christian and Hindu holidays to Ramadan. And there is strong, if scattered, scientific literature that includes empirical evidence from doctors with fasting experience; a smattering of more-controlled experiments in humans; overwhelming evidence from animal experiments; and a sort of amicus brief from a better-studied field called calorie restriction. In calorie restriction, participants eat only 60 percent to 70 percent of their weight-

maintenance intake. "This consistently decreases the biological rate of aging and increases life-span," says Eric Ravussin, Ph.D., a physiologist at the Pennington Biomedical Research Center. (See "How Fasting Improves Your Health" on page 188.)

One empiricist is Joel Fuhrman, M.D., author of *Fast-ing and Eating for Health* and a family doctor in Flemington, New Jersey, who has put thousands of patients on multiday fasts and followed their vital signs and blood work closely. "For a healthy person, medical supervision is not needed for a 5-day fast," he tells me. He's never seen electrolyte depletion or potassium loss, which can cause cardiac arrhythmias, prior to the 10th day of a fast.

Dr. Fuhrman instructs patients with inflammatory problems like lupus and arthritis to consider episodic fasting. I have Crohn's, an inflammatory bowel disease. I've had far fewer flare-ups in the past 14 months. Rodent studies show this anti-inflammatory benefit, as does at least one human study. James B. Johnson, M.D., from the department of surgery at Louisiana State University, put nine overweight asthma patients on a near-fasting regimen every other day for 8 weeks. On average, those patients lost 8 percent of their weight, lowered their cholesterol by 20 points, and improved their airflow by 15 percent due to less airway inflammation. "There's nothing out there that would work as well as that, other than systemic steroids," says Dr. Johnson, author of *The Alternate-Day Diet*.

Other studies piece together what happens to hunger strikers and starvation victims. The bottom line: Our bodies are built to go long stretches without food. When you eat, your liver and muscles store up energy in the form of glycogen. When you fast, your body feeds off that glycogen for several days and then starts burning your fat stores. Once those are depleted, starvation starts: The body breaks down muscle first and

FOUR RULES OF FASTING

1. DON'T FAST UNLESS YOU'RE IN GOOD SHAPE AND EAT RIGHT ALREADY

People who are severely overweight or don't eat a generally healthful diet could see blood-pressure drops, low nutrient levels, or other problems, says Joel Fuhrman, M.D.

2. START OFF EASY

A few 24-hour fasts will help your body—and mind—adjust. Two nights without food can be a long time for novices. But after several weeks, making the jump to 36 hours becomes a matter of skipping just one more dinner.

3. BOOKEND THE FAST WITH THE RIGHT MEALS

If you eat a carbohydrate-laden large meal before you fast, it will make you hungrier the next day. Similarly, a small meal with protein at the end of the fast will prevent you from feeling overstuffed.

4. PACE YOURSELF

You want the hardest part—the end of the fast—to hit while you're sleeping so your brain is sharp during the waking period of the fast. If starting with a 24-hour fast, go from breakfast to breakfast, not dinner to dinner. —S.W.

then organs, which leads to death after 8 to 10 weeks. This timeline assumes access to water. Dehydration can kill in days.

Foster fasts to find God. For me, fasting is vaguely spiritual, a time for reflection. I close my eyes and munch on my last bit of melon. I picture a hunter-gatherer ancestor. He hasn't killed game in days, but that's okay. He has bodily wisdom to last many weeks. That's an awesome capability. My 36 hours is a mere gesture.

ANY OTHER DAY I DEVELOP a headache if I skip coffee, but not on fasting days. I have no idea why. I often play racquetball with my friend Scott, and I exhibit fierce energy on the court. My body feels springy on

tongue coats over with a white film, and my breath stinks. These are classic signs of detoxification—according to my acupuncturist, anyway.

There's nothing alternative about Mark Mattson, Ph.D., who's conducted the most animal research on fasting. Holding appointments at the NIH's National Institute on Aging and at Johns Hopkins, Mattson has put thousands of rodents on intermittent fasting and on calorie-restriction regimens. He's also done the most to aggregate the findings from other labs. In the *2005 Annual Review of Nutrition*, Mattson summarized the benefits of fasting on everything from cholesterol to cancer.

The mental benefits of fasting excite Mattson most. Fasting increases production of several

“ON FASTING DAYS I WAKE FROM A NAP IN MY PEACEFUL ZONE. MY WIFE CALLS IT *MEDIO BOBO*, CUBAN FOR ‘HALF STUPID.’”

fasting mornings, and my mind is as clear as water.

I occasionally choose different days to fast, to work it comfortably around dinner parties, travel, and whatnot, and by now I've done it on every day of the week. I've gone to work, driven long distances, taken hikes, had sex, and lifted weights while fasting. Admittedly, I'm flying in the face of alternative medicine, which considers fasting a detoxifying process best done by easing into it. Don't send so much blood to your muscles, the theory goes—send it all to your liver. Without digestion of food to deal with, the liver can scrub the blood, ridding it of pesticides, food additives, and other toxins. These exit through your pores, sinuses, colon, and urine. Some people apparently suffer from acne, rashes, and headaches while fasting. I don't. But my

molecules, including brain-derived neurotrophic factor, which protect the neurons from all sorts of disease down the line, Mattson tells me. As a result, fasting rats show better memory, cognition, motor function, and neurogenesis (production of new nerve cells from stem cells). He's shown that fasting mice bounce back from heart attacks and strokes better than everyday eaters do.

If just a fraction of the fasting benefits seen in rodents were conferred by a pill, drug companies would be racing to prove them in humans. The human studies so far have involved too few participants to yield sweeping claims. Having said that, in the studies that have been done, there are no documented downsides to fasting. None. But that doesn't mean they're not there. One problem that crops up in

HOW FASTING IMPROVES YOUR HEALTH

MITOCHONDRIA INSIDE YOUR BODY'S CELLS USE CARBOHYDRATES TO MAKE CELL FUEL. THE MOLECULAR BY-PRODUCT: FREE RADICALS THAT DAMAGE DNA, IMPAIR CELLULAR FUNCTION, AND PROMOTE CANCER. HERE'S HOW FASTING MAY HELP.

- **1. Fewer free radicals** During a fast, the mitochondria, sensing a lack of food, become more efficient. Like a cleaner-burning fire, they start producing fewer free radicals per calorie burned, says Eric Ravussin, Ph.D. a clinical investigator at Pennington Biomedical Research Center.
- **2. More antioxidants** The diminishing number of free radicals is met by an increase in antioxidant production within your cells. These enzymes “search and destroy free radicals,” says Mark Mattson, Ph.D., a neuroscientist at the National Institutes of Health.
- **3. Stronger cells** This cleaner calorie-burning also produces a surge in beneficial stress hormones, such as cortisol and growth hormone. “Exercise during a fast and the increase is even greater,” says Ravussin, adding that the hormones prepare cells for worse stresses. “They'll better resist tumors and rebound faster from a heart attack.” S.W.

the similar world of calorie restriction: Fertility takes a dive. I know my sperm is okay. A Crohn's medication had tanked my sperm count, but I've been off the drug for 3 months—fasting weekly the whole time—and recent testing shows my swimmers are once again rigorous and plentiful.

ranging the furniture is great. Paying bills is torture. The best afternoon pastime, honestly, is to nap. Naps on fasting days are glorious. I instantly go deep and drool on my pillow, and I wake up in the best part of my fast, my peaceful zone. My wife calls it *medio bobo*, Cuban slang for “half stupid.” I think she means it endearingly.

By five in the afternoon, my hunger is gone and I am infused with this calm that I don't know how to describe, except to say that when I'm in it, I'd rather not talk to you. For once in my week, I don't give a crap about e-mail or my to-do list. I like watching the camellia in my backyard. Time dilates in my perception. It also frees up for real, regifting me the 2 hours I'd normally spend preparing and eating food. I like grocery shopping on fasting days. It's part discipline test, part ego boost: “See me abstain! I am Jedi master!”

It's also a happy preview of what I will eat in the days ahead. What I will savor with the gusto and guiltlessness of a man who's earned it: Belgian endive with Michigan blue cheese, roasted leek and Reggiano tart, lamb tagine with medjool dates, Oaxacan chocolate cake with cracked hazelnuts and a raspberry reduction . . .

It's enough to make me not want to eat. Not yet. ■

I

I admit it: On Sunday afternoon, I usually get hungry. The primal drive to eat is strong. I've cut a few fasts down to 24 hours. Twice I gave up fasting for good, but within 10 days I noticed my food sense regressing. I started eating crap again, and my body started creeping back up to its prefasting weight. I returned to the practice. I'm hooked, it seems, despite myself.

None of this helps when I'm hungry on a fasting day. I don't know if, like the rats, I'm getting any smarter over time, but I do know that when I'm in the thick of a 36-hour fast, intellectual activity is best avoided. Rear-