

Dr. Will Cole's

Intermittent Fasting

3-Day Starter Guide + Recipes

What is Intermittent Fasting?

Intermittent fasting – when you go without food for a period of time – is one of my favorite go-to tools to naturally drive down inflammation, reset your metabolism, and renew your overall health.

Now, I know you are probably wondering why eating is a problem if what you are eating is made up of healthy, whole-food sources. For some, the idea of fasting by eating only one or two meals a day still sounds like an extreme and overly restrictive dieting tactic. But many of us already feel like victims to our daily eating schedule: three meals a day, plus snacks.

This fixed eating schedule has become the norm. The truth is, this is an artificially constructed schedule that does not reflect our bodies' natural and most optimal eating schedule. In fact, eating three meals every day can cause metabolic inflexibility, which can easily lead to inflammation, weight gain, fatigue and chronic health problems. For millions of years, our bodies have actually functioned best with periodic times of fasting.

After years of consulting patients in my telehealth functional medicine clinic, I saw first-hand the benefits of fasting for improved health. As I talk about in my book *Intuitive Fasting*, fasting gives us the ability to take control of our hunger to make fasting intuitive by getting in touch with your instinctive eating patterns to become healthier and more mindful about how and when you eat.

Benefits of Intermittent Fasting

When your body is out of balance it can be very difficult to discern what it needs to build vibrant wellness. Instead, fasting triggers shifts in metabolic and hormonal pathways that bring balance back to the body with some surprising benefits.

1. Supports a Healthy Gut

Just like the ocean tides ebb and flow throughout the day, so do the different colonies of bacteria in your microbiome. These populations of bacteria increase and decrease depending on if we are awake, eating, or sleeping. This circadian rhythm of your microbiome is normal and happens on a daily basis but continuous eating can throw off its normal pattern. Because our bodies aren't built for 24/7 eating, fasting can reset your microbiome's natural ebb and flow. Fasting also lowers gut-specific inflammation in health problems like Crohn's disease and IBS, while also lowering inflammatory markers like IL-6 and CRP that contribute to inflammation in other areas of the body besides just your gut.

2. Enhances Brain Function

This is one of the most exciting emerging benefits of fasting. Strong preclinical evidence is showing that fasting can prevent and slow down the progression of Alzheimer's disease and Parkinson's disease. Pretty incredible, isn't it?



It does this by increasing the ability for brain cells to resist stress and stimulating autophagy, boosting mitochondrial function, antioxidant defenses, and DNA repair, according to a study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*. Fasting can also increase neuroplasticity, which is the brain's ability to reorganize itself and form new neural connections throughout your lifetime.

3. Stabilizes Blood Sugar and Resets Metabolism

The CDC estimates that about half of Americans are either prediabetic or diabetic. About 90 to 95 percent of diabetes cases are type 2 adult-onset diabetes, which means that almost all of them are lifestyle-related. Intermittent fasting has been proven to lower insulin resistance by putting your body into ketosis, which means you start burning fat for fuel instead of sugar.

4. Restores Energy Levels

Burning fat instead of sugar also gives you more energy by providing you a stable source of fuel as well as increasing the production of mitochondria. If you've never heard of the mitochondria before, they're known as the "energy centers" of your cells. They are what allow us to take the food we eat and turn the nutrients into a specific form of energy (called ATP) that fuels our body. The healthier our mitochondria, the more energy we have.

If you want to unlock these benefits and more, use this guide as your starting point for incorporating fasting into your daily life.

With any sort of diet or lifestyle change, make sure to talk with your doctor to determine if it is the best choice for you. Women in particular should be more cautious with fasting since it may impact the balance of female hormones. If you struggle with an eating disorder, be especially mindful if this is the right choice for you.

Your 3-Day Starting Point

If you are new to fasting, you'll want to start out slow in order to set a foundation that allows for greater metabolic flexibility while training your body to access fat for fuel. To accomplish this without having to fast for too many hours, you'll be starting out with a 12-hour fast.

This light time-restricted feeding window is the best fasting method for starting out because it allows you to get the benefits of fasting without completely upending your daily routine. Here's how it will work: you'll eat within a 12-hour window and fast for 12 hours each day. At first, 12 hours without food might seem like a lot, but those hours can include the time when you're sleeping, so in reality you'll only be fasting 3-4 hours while you're awake.



Day 1

Breakfast: Green Smoothie – 8:00 a.m.

I like to ease into eating with an easy-to-digest smoothie. A green smoothie avoids the high-sugar content often found in fruit-based smoothies which will help you avoid getting on a blood-sugar rollercoaster. Smoothies are also great for packing a lot of healthy fats into one meal.

Ingredients

- 1 avocado
- 1 cup full-fat coconut milk
- 1 small handful blueberries
- 1 tablespoon [chia seeds](#)
- 1 cup greens of choice (spinach, chard, etc.)

Directions

Place all ingredients in a blender and combine.

Lunch: Grass-Fed Burgers – 12:00 p.m.

I love to prep multiple grass-fed liver burgers to warm up throughout the week. Up the health benefits by making a burger salad with greens packed with B-vitamins and a homemade dressing loaded with healthy fats to increase methylation and detox pathways.

Ingredients

- ½ pound grass-fed beef
- ½ pound grass-fed beef liver
- ½ teaspoon cumin
- ½ teaspoon garlic powder
- Sea salt and pepper to taste
- [Desired cooking oil](#)

Directions

1. Place all ingredients in a bowl and mix with hands to form desired-size patties.
2. Heat cooking oil on medium-high heat in a skillet.
3. Cook burgers until desired doneness.
4. Store in the fridge in a sealed container and use within 4 days.

Snack: Cinnamon Roll Fat Bombs – 2:30 p.m.

Fat bombs are a delicious way to satisfy your sweet tooth while still giving you enough healthy fats to keep you full until dinner. The yummy cinnamon roll taste will make you forget all about the cinnamon rolls of your past!

Ingredients

- ½ cup coconut cream
- 1 teaspoon cinnamon
- 1 tablespoon [coconut oil](#)
- 2 tablespoons almond butter

Directions

1. Mix together ½ teaspoon cinnamon and coconut cream.
2. Line an 8-by-8-inch square pan with parchment paper and spread the coconut cream/cinnamon mixture at the bottom.
3. Mix together ½ teaspoon of cinnamon with coconut oil and almond butter. Spread over the first layer in the pan.
4. Freeze pan for 10 minutes and then cut into desired-size bars or squares.

Dinner: Salmon + Veggies – 5:30 p.m.

Salmon is one of my favorite sources of omega-3 healthy fats but any type of wild-caught seafood will work as well. Serve fish with vegetables roasted in [avocado or coconut oil](#) and you have a complete superfood meal.

Ingredients

- 1 pound salmon or other desired fish
- 2 tablespoons fresh lemon juice
- 2 tablespoons ghee
- 4 cloves garlic, finely diced

Directions

1. Preheat oven to 400 degrees F.
2. Mix together ghee, garlic, and lemon juice.
3. Place salmon on top of a sheet of foil and pour lemon and ghee mixture over the top.
4. Wrap foil over salmon and place on a baking sheet.
5. Bake for 15 minutes or until salmon is cooked through.
6. Roast vegetables alongside salmon on a separate baking sheet at the same time if your oven size is big enough.



Days 2 + 3

The next two days are going to be almost identical to day 1. You will keep the same eating window and focus on meals that contain a ratio of healthy fats, non-starchy vegetables and protein from clean, whole food sources.

Tips For Getting Started with Intermittent Fasting

Drink More Water

Staying hydrated is key to getting through your fast. Fasting from food doesn't mean staying away from water. Make sure you're getting about half your body weight in ounces of water each day.

Prioritize Sleep

You may feel fatigued when starting your fast so make sure you are getting at least 7 hours of sleep each night. And if you have the luxury of turning off your alarm entirely, do it and let your body sleep as much as it needs.

Don't Cut Calories

Always eat until you're full during your eating window. No calorie counting! If you are feeling hungry, it's a clue that you need to eat more fat and protein in your meals. Remember, fasting is more than about losing weight, it's about refreshing your overall health.

Get Enough Electrolytes

As you start to shift from burning sugar to burning fat while fasting, you may experience some symptoms of "die-off" because your fat cells often serve as a storage place for toxins. Not everyone experiences these symptoms such as nausea, upset stomach. If you do and have already upped the amount of fat and protein in your meals, make sure you are getting enough electrolytes through seasoning your meals with salt or adding [electrolyte supplements](#) to your water.*

*These statements have not been evaluated by the Food and Drug Administration. These products are not intended to diagnose, treat, cure or prevent any disease.

Give Yourself Grace

If you are experiencing extremely uncomfortable symptoms, don't force a 12 hour fast. This is where the concept of intuitive fasting comes in. If you find it difficult to make it for 12 hours, start with 9 or 10 hours and slowly work your way up to 12 over the course of a week or even 2 weeks. Everyone's biochemistry is unique, so understand that what works for one person might not work for you - and that's ok!

Foods and Supplements To Support Your Fast

MCTs

[MCT](#) stands for medium-chain triglyceride, a high-quality fat found naturally in foods like coconut oil and ghee. With little caloric effect and zero sugar, adding MCTs to your tea and meals can help you feel fuller for longer and support the benefits of your fast.*

Tea

When you first start fasting, it can be very normal to experience cravings because your metabolism is shifting. Tea has been shown to help manage cravings, support the cellular renewal process of autophagy - which is already enhanced through fasting - and help you adapt to intermittent fasting with minimal discomfort.

Electrolytes

There are a few ways to replenish your electrolytes without downing a sports drink:

- Himalayan pink sea salt: can be added to water or used to season meals
- Broth: vegetable or chicken bone broth made with electrolyte-rich foods like mushrooms and spinach will provide you with potassium and magnesium
- Supplements: There are some great electrolyte supplements on the market that can be easily mixed with water, like these [effervescent electrolyte tablets](#)



Next Steps

I usually suggest fasting for 12 hours for at least a week before moving on to longer-fasting windows. This gives your body time to adjust so you can fully reap the benefits of extended fasting.

Here are some advanced fasting protocols to consider after your 12 hour fast.

Intermediate: The 12-6 window plan

This plan is exactly the same as the beginner plan but with an added 6 hours of fasting time. This is what I personally do during the workweek. Since I am not a fan of breakfast, I like to sip on a few cups of herbal tea throughout the morning. You'll be getting a full 18 hours of fasting and only eat between 12 p.m. and 6 p.m.

Intermediate: The modified 2-day plan

This plan is structured a little different than the first two. You'll be eating clean for 5 days of the week (which days are up to you) and on the remaining two days your calories will be restricted to no more than 700 calories. Calorie restriction provides a lot of the same benefits as a full day of fasting. During the 5 days of eating you can structure your meals however you like but they still need to contain healthy fats, clean meats, vegetables, and if desired, some fruit.

High-intermediate: The 5-2 plan

Just like the modified 2-day plan, you will be eating clean for 5 days of the week. However, the other two days you won't eat anything for 24 hours and these days must be nonconsecutive. For example, you'll fast completely on Sunday and Wednesday. Everything you do eat will again consist of healthy fats, clean protein, and produce. Remember, you shouldn't jump right into this plan if you haven't intermittent fasted before. Make sure to talk to your doctor before starting any fasting protocol to determine if it is the best choice for your health case.

Advanced: Every-other-day plan

This plan is extremely simple. Alternate between days of eating and not eating. Even though this is intense, it offers some amazing benefits. On days that you are eating, you guessed it, focus on healthy fats, clean meat sources, vegetables, and some fruit. On fasting days, you are still allowed to have herbal tea and small amounts of caffeinated tea and coffee. Also, make sure to drink enough water!

This information should give you everything you need to feel confident in meal planning while intermittent fasting. Although it may seem complicated right now, fasting will become a habit and part of your natural routine. Start slow and gradually work toward more advanced fasting protocols once you have discussed this option with your doctor.



About Dr. Will Cole

Dr. Will Cole is a leading functional medicine expert who consults people around the globe, starting one of the first functional medicine telehealth centers in the world over a decade ago. Named one of the top 50 functional and integrative doctors in the nation, Dr. Will Cole specializes in clinically investigating underlying factors of chronic disease and customizing a functional medicine approach for thyroid issues, autoimmune conditions, hormonal imbalances, digestive disorders, and brain problems. He is also the host of the popular *The Art Of Being Well* podcast and was the co-host of Gwyneth Paltrow's lifestyle brand goop's first spinoff podcast, the goopellas podcast. He is the bestselling author of *Ketotarian*, *The Inflammation Spectrum*, and the New York Times bestseller: *Intuitive Fasting*.

