



General Article

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Fasting: Myths and Scientific Approach

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General misconception about fasting

Fasting is total abstinence from food (except water) for a defined period of time, so long as the body supports itself on stored reserves within the tissues and without any damage to the organism. A fast is broken when starvation starts. Starvation is the process of dying because of lack of some essential of life, such as warmth, water or food. It aimed to physiological rest; natural elimination and detox process; physiological compensation; and weight loss. Physiological compensation conserves energies which are then channelized for healing. Loosing weight through fasting is easier than through dieting or fruit fasting; muscle tone maintained even if weight reduced and reduces heaviness and excess fluids.

During fasting the rate of production of energy through autolysis in the body seems to be very slow. If the rate of energy expenditure (due to our normal physical activities such as talking, walking, etc.) is more than the rate of energy production then the patient may feel tired and weak, and this may also put a drain on his/her vital force. Hence, rest during fasting is very important to get benefits from fasting.

Fasting needs quiet, peaceful, relaxed and cheerful surrounding, where air and water is fresh and pure, and people are supportive. Proper guidance and support is essential. Fasting can be done in any season. The length of a fast must be guided by the day-by-day development in the physical state of the faster, and not as per an arbitrary time limit.

A number of misconceptions are associated with fasting like- fasting is dangerous i.e. you may hurt yourself if you don't eat; you become weak and exhausted; you may damage your body organs; fasting are religious rituals; it is only for overweight and obese people; you can fast only in certain seasons; dieting is as good as fasting; and fasting has "adverse reactions" etc.

Types of fast

Important types are complete fasting (*poorna upavas*), partial fasting (*anshik upavas*), water fasting, juice fasting, fruit fasting, vegetable fasting – raw or boiled, skipping one meal, ritual fasting, weekly fast, short fasting – 1 to 3 days (*laghu upavas*), repeated fasting of short duration, longer fasting – in weeks (*guru upavas*).

Nine basic steps to be considered before conducting a fast

1. Preparation and counseling
2. Rest: Normal daily routine should be checked as plenty of rest during fast is essential.
3. Activity: Rate at which energy is produced through the breakdown of body tissues is very slow. Therefore, if the rate of energy being expended is high, due to exercise,

walking, etc. then the patient may feel tired or even exhausted.

4. Warmth
5. Water
6. Bathing: should take daily bath with near body temperature water. Bath should be quick, to conserve energy. At later stage, sponge bath may do.
7. Sunbathing: maximum 15 minutes each side, if feel comfortable.
8. Purges (enema, etc.): May be required at the beginning of the fast, but not essential.
9. Suffering: patient suffering too much from a disease should avoid the fast. Fast should be taken only if patient is physically and mentally prepared and completely fit.

Physiological changes occurs during fasting

In Krebs cycle carbohydrates and fat metabolize and deposit in body. Enzymatic lysis of certain body tissues occurs like glycogen in liver. Tissues are called upon in inverse order of their importance to the organism-fat is first to go which also results in release of toxins and thus Detox. The rate of heart beats, circulation and respiration slows down.

During fasting the faster may feel occasional hunger and unease for the first couple of days. Hunger usually subsides by the end of third day. Withdrawal symptoms like headache, fever, dizziness, weakness, trembling, pain in abdomen, muscular pain, etc. may observe due to abstinence from normal habits such as food and drinks, smoking, medication, stimulants in food items. Healing crises (*Ubhad/Upadrava*) due to old diseases are common during fasting, like occasional nausea and vomiting; spitting; cold, cough and runny nose; headache; skin rashes and etching; fever; giddiness, dizziness and fainting; *vata* related – palpitation; diarrhea; dysentery; insomnia, fruit fasting for a few days before starting the water fast helps cleanse the body and pacify the effect of healing crises which generally subsides in a week.

Other changes includes-tongue coats heavily; a bad taste develops in mouth; breath acquires a bad odour; teeth may become pasty; urine may become darker, even almost black and foul; occasional skin eruptions, giddiness, fainting, palpitation of the heart should not be regarded as crisis; occasional diarrhea; weight loss may not be

uniform throughout the fasting- it may range from 500 g to 1 Kg per day and may exceed 2 Kg in some cases. Weight loss reduces towards the end. During a fast, in condition of persistent dehydration, the fast should be terminated. Do not take any medicine, herb, coffee, tea, soft drinks, laxatives, purgatives, etc while fasting. Watch carefully for signs which indicate completion of a fast.

Signs and symptoms that suggest the Detox is complete and the fast should be ended

- ◆ Hunger returns
- ◆ Coating on tongue clears
- ◆ Urine becomes normal
- ◆ Breath becomes sweet
- ◆ Taste returns
- ◆ Pulse gets normal
- ◆ Body temperature returns to normal

How to end Fast

Ending a Fast is more difficult than conducting one. Following points should be kept in mind-

- Be gentle on your digestive system. Eat according to your Agni/digestive fire/ appetite
- Start with juices of citrus fruits
- Gradually increasing the quantity and frequency of fruits
- After fruits, gradually start with vegetable soups, boiled vegetables and salads
- Rest is advised during the weaning down phase
- Important – avoid overfeeding!

Breaking a typical three day fast

- 1st day- fruit juices, three to four times
- 2nd day- increase frequency of juices, may take a fruit and include soup at one time
- 3rd day- include salads and boiled vegetables at one time
- 4th day- include *Khichadi* at one time

Breaking fast after longer duration (two to three weeks)

- 1st day- half a glass (50 to 100 ml) of citrus fruit juice every hour should be taken from 8 am to 6 pm.

- 2nd day – full glass every two hours
- 3rd day – one citrus fruit as breakfast, two at lunch and three at dinner
- 4th day - 2-3 fruits at breakfast, green salad at lunch, fruits at dinner
- 5th day – fruits at breakfast, cooked/boiled vegetables at lunch, fruits at dinner
- 6th day – same as 5th day, but amount can be increased
- 7th day – normal proportions of three meals a day

General benefits

Fasting is not a cure. It doesn't cure or heal anything, but provides physiological rest and help to remove all causes of disease. This enables the restorative processes to work properly, which result in healing. Therefore, fasting is self-healing. It withdraws the signs and symptoms of many diseases and improves general physical and mental capabilities and responses

Conditions where fasting is most effective

Fasting is most effective for the patients of Chronic eczema, urticaria, varicose ulcers, gastric and duodenal ulcers, asthma, arthritis, obesity, colitis, amoebic dysentery, high blood pressure, endocarditis, sinusitis, bronchitis, acute and chronic appendicitis, fistula, psoriasis, digestive disorders, urinary calculi, lumps on breast, migraine, acidosis, epilepsy, common cold and rheumatism.

Conditions where fast must be monitored very closely or may be undesirable

Fasting should be avoided or should be done after consulting medial practitioner in the conditions of emaciation; advanced stages of heart disease; blood deficiency; cancer (being a catabolic condition), including cancers of liver and pancreas; diabetes; advanced stages of tuberculosis; pregnancy; lactation period; and fear.