

# In A Bite with Charlotte Mei

Intermittent fasting - just another fad diet?

Full Transcript

CHARLOTTE: Hey there! It's Charlotte Mei, and you're listening to In A Bite! Before I get into this week's topic, if you haven't already done so, follow the channel so it appears in your library, and rate it so more people get to know about it.

Today's topic is a highly requested one. When I had put out a poll on IG stories asking for suggested topics, this one came up a number of times, so here it is: our episode on Intermittent Fasting!

Now as you know, I try my best to make sure that whatever I share on In A Bite is based on the latest science at the time of recording. So, this means having to trawl through journal articles, and make sense of the data and findings. Pretty much what I had to do a lot of during university! And well, this experience has taught me that I now have a much lower stamina for it!

So because of that, this one took me quite some time, but I loved the entire experience. It was so interesting just getting to know the latest science around the topic. It was challenging because the results from my research showed varying results when it came to the impact that intermittent fasting had on health. There were results that showed positive health outcomes, and some others that showed no change. Also the available studies out there look at different sample populations - you've got those that studied model organisms such as mice and yeast, and then others that looked at humans. And amongst those that actually studied humans, most look at overweight and obese populations, or athletes. So as you can tell, it's challenging to summarise the effect of intermittent fasting across a general population. I won't go into the specifics of each study, but I will share the general patterns of what they found, and I will focus only on human studies.

Another note I want to make is that in a space like this, many experts and medical professionals bring in their own personal biases about the topic, which is really natural to do. For example, some may stick to the belief that breakfast is the most important meal of the day... can't be skipped. And some others are bent on the idea that fasting is the panacea for weight loss and metabolic health and so on. So I just want to caution you when listening to information out there like this to take it with a pinch of salt, especially when personal opinions come into the space. And do what works for you. If I'm sharing my own personal opinion here, I will definitely make it clear.

My goal today is to help you understand what intermittent fasting is all about, whether or not it's suitable for you, and to share a user guide should you wish to try it out. Towards the

end of the episode, I will also share my experience with it because, to be honest, I never thought I would get into anything like this. But I did.

So here we go - is intermittent fasting just another dieting trend? Let's find out.

I'm sure you know that paying attention to what you eat is important to maintain a good balanced lifestyle. But when you eat can also impact certain health outcomes like weight, overall health, and potentially longevity! And this is where fasting comes into the picture.

The act of fasting is not new to mankind. Most people sleep through the night without any episodes of eating - and that alone constitutes some sort of a fast. The definition of fasting is a period where no energy-containing foods or beverages are consumed; and so with that, we can say that most of us fast during our sleep. Now, there is also the phenomenon of night-time eating which will most certainly interrupt one's fasting, but that's an episode for another day.

During intermittent fasting, you alternate between periods of eating and fasting, and there are various forms out there. They include: alternate day fasting, 5:2 fasting, daily time restricted feeding amongst others.

So just breaking it down, for alternate day fasting, as the name suggests, you eat what you want for one day, and the next you fast by consuming minimal calories, So this is about a quarter of your daily energy requirement. Basically, a cycle of feast and famine.

For 5:2 fasting, you eat as you like 5 days of the week, and on the remaining 2 days, you fast. And same here, that means limiting your intake to a quarter of your energy needs.

The third is daily time restricted feeding, where you eat however much you like, but your eating occasions are limited to specific hours of the day. Essentially, you narrow your eating window. This is what is commonly referred to as the 16:8 or 12:12 diet, depending on the timing you have chosen to be in a feeding or fasting state. So for example, 16:8 involves fasting for 16 hours, and eating all meals within a 8 hour window of your choice. And with these forms of fasting, you can still drink water and any zero-calorie beverages like plain tea and coffee.

Before I go on to speak about the benefits of intermittent fasting, I just wanted to touch on the term 'caloric restriction', also referred to as 'dietary restriction'. I bring this up because most of the studies that look into intermittent fasting compare it against these types of restrictions. And they are simply the types of dieting most of us are familiar with - where certain foods or food groups are restricted, or one's calorie intake gets reduced. It focuses on what to eat rather than when to eat, and it's the more...traditional way of dieting, I'd say.

So, when did intermittent fasting become so popular? I checked out Google Trends for this and it turns out that globally, the search term "intermittent fasting" picked up in 2012, and

only really started growing after 2016. So it's all pretty recent! I also found this quite amusing but not surprising. The searches for intermittent fasting tended to see a spike in January as well as during the June-July period. Classic!

So now in this episode I'll focus mainly on benefits such as weight loss, improved metabolic health, as well as something that has piqued the interest of scientists and biohackers out there: longevity.

Beginning with weight loss.

As mentioned earlier, these are results from studies that looked at obese and overweight participants specifically. Most, but not all, of the studies on intermittent fasting showed a degree of weight loss. And this was mostly a mild loss of weight.

For studies that compared a group of fasters to a group that underwent calorie restricting diets, there was no significant difference in weight loss. This shows that intermittent fasting is not superior to conventional calorie restricting diets when it comes to weight management. At the end of the day, it doesn't matter if your calories were spread throughout the day, or consumed in a small window of time, but what matters is how much you're actually eating and what you're eating. What I'd say though, is that the choice of your first meal influences the insulin levels in your blood, and can determine your hunger levels and potentially cravings for the rest of the day. Without going into too much detail, my advice is to go for something that has fibre and protein in it to avoid spikes in your blood sugar levels.

So going back to comparing intermittent fasting and calorie restriction diets, what fasting allows is a potential decrease in energy intake without having to count calories, and without having to think about what foods to eat. And this is where intermittent fasting gained popularity when it comes to weight loss. Most people find the rigidity of caloric restriction too difficult to maintain, and so intermittent fasting is much easier to adhere to. That said, there is no science that states intermittent fasting is easier to stick to in the long term. Because anything that includes a sort of restriction isn't easy for all. So I think that would be interesting to look into.

And speaking about the long term, most studies aren't conducted for long enough. So we do need longer term trials of more than a year, and larger testing groups to fully investigate the impact of intermittent fasting on weight loss and long term weight management.

Do take note that the papers I looked at studied different types of intermittent fasting. So, the 5:2, alternate day and daily time restricted feeding. So we're not able to say which produces the best results.

As you know, there are many methods for weight loss. And if that's something you're looking to do, the most important is finding something that you can follow through with - and of course making sure the method is reliable and based on the basics of a well-balanced diet.

And here's the thing, it doesn't end there. Once you've achieved your healthy body weight, the next challenge is to maintain it through a balanced diet, and not yo-yoing from 'ok im gonna eat really well today', followed by a weekend of poor eating. You know how it goes.

So, when we lose weight, we don't just lose fat - we lose some muscle along with it too. And because muscle helps to maintain a higher metabolism, ideally we won't want to lose too much of it. Here's something interesting about intermittent fasting when it comes to this. A systematic review and meta analysis published in 2021 compared intermittent fasting and non-intermittent fasting diets. And they found that subjects who practised the fasting saw significant improvements in body composition like fat mass, BMI, body fat percentage while preserving lean mass. Now this was tested specifically in adults performing resistance training so that's something to take note of. So resistance training along with consuming enough calories and adequate protein is integral to preserving muscle mass. I'll touch more on that when we go into the user guide for fasting but for now it's interesting to know that with intermittent fasting, you can lose body weight while preserving your muscle mass.

So we know now that when it comes to weight loss, intermittent fasting generally shows positive results, however not any more than as seen with traditional calorie restricting diets. That aside, researchers are interested in whether it offers other benefits independent of weight loss, such as reduced blood pressure, improved insulin resistance, improved total cholesterol levels, etc.

Looking at the body of evidence, it was a mixed bag of results. Out of those that showed positive ones, quite similar to the results seen in weight loss, there were no significant differences to prove that intermittent fasting provides unique metabolic benefits over traditional calorie restriction diets.

There were however some interesting findings in terms of the timing and duration of one's fast.

In terms of timing, one paper found that having an earlier fasting window (so something like 9am to 3pm) showed pronounced benefits for specific markers such as insulin sensitivity and blood pressure. Now insulin sensitivity is, afterall, higher in the morning so it makes sense that shifting one's eating window to earlier in the day would be better in this case.

And when it came to the duration of a fast, results from a study done just a year ago showed that extending the duration of your daily fast to periods longer than 12 hours may yield further cardiometabolic benefits.

So aside from intermittent fasting leading to healthier lives through weight loss and improved health markers, are there any other benefits?

I mentioned longevity earlier. Now could humans possibly live longer, healthier lives through intermittent fasting? If we look at the benefits I've just mentioned, an improvement in body fat levels and other health markers are beneficial towards overall health, so technically we're already extending life here. Now, those are the physiological changes one can observe from intermittent fasting; but science shows that on top of that, fasting may affect our body at a cellular and molecular level too!

And one of these ways is through autophagy which means 'self-eating' in Greek. This is a process where our body clears out dead or damaged cells to make new, healthier ones. It kinda acts like a recycling factory within the body! And the result of this cell-cleaning process is shown to be protective against age-related diseases. Do note that autophagy isn't exclusive to fasting. It happens in our bodies constantly, however at a pretty low level. Think of it this way - fasting doesn't work to turn on autophagy like a switch. Instead, it's like installing a dimmer to the system. When you fast, it can move the autophagy dial up!

That said, there is a long way to go with evidence from human studies, so this is an interesting space to keep your eye on.

Now, let's talk about putting it into practice.

Being a nutritionist, I often get asked for my thoughts about particular eating styles, and whether or not I've tried them myself.

As I'm a proponent of balanced eating, I'm not usually one for going on a specific diet or drastically changing the way I eat. However, it was easier for me to warm up to the idea of intermittent fasting as it wasn't so much about what I was eating, but when I was eating.

The people closest to me will know that I have a habit of getting up early in the morning and going to bed late - not the best I know! - and I would start my day first thing with breakfast. So as you can imagine, my eating window is pretty wide. And because of this, I wanted to see what it would be like if I shortened it through daily time-restricted feeding, and thereby also give my gut a longer rest time. Deep down inside, I was also hoping it would result in me sleeping earlier. Spoiler alert: it didn't!

So I started with a 12-hr fasting window to begin with - I'd keep my eating occasions to 12 hours, and fast for the other 12. Pretty straight forward. Over time, I slowly increased my fasting window to about 15-16 hours daily.

Now, changes experienced:

I commonly hear that people feel a sense of clarity, less bloatedness, etc, however I didn't notice most of that. I did however experience some weight loss 3 months into the time restricted feeding, However I honestly can't attribute it fully to the fasting. I've also not done any tests to see if things like my metabolic markers, body composition, or nutrient stores have changed. And talking about nutrient stores, this is something I'm really curious about for people who fast, because having lesser time to eat can mean lesser opportunities to get nutrients into your body. So if there's anything that has changed for me since going on a time-restricted eating schedule for me, I've been even more conscious than I usually am of my food choices, making sure they're as nutrient dense as possible.

When I fast, I use an app to help me track my fasting days and times to see how I was going throughout the month. For example, on days where I'm particularly stressed, or am at the beginning of my period, I'm usually unable to complete my intended fast. So a few interesting data points there.

For those of you that wanna check it out, the app is called ZERO, and was developed by a medical doctor, who focuses on the science of longevity. He also has a bunch of resources on the app which are quite useful for beginners out there.

I notice that people get bogged down by 'hey how long are you fasting for' etc etc. And here's where I'm coming in with my personal opinion . I'm not too strict with myself about it, and I allow for flexibility. Simply because that's my philosophy with food. So if I do feel like eating, I check in on the sensation, and if I want a bite, I'll have it even if it means breaking my fast. I'm definitely not here to starve myself or put myself at risk of gastritis!

And that's how I would advise someone who wants to try out intermittent fasting, which brings me to my next point - which populations should be cautious of intermittent fasting, and how should one begin?

Hopefully by now with all that was shared, you'd know that there is no one size fits all approach when it comes to food and nutrition, and that there is no magic bullet to weight loss or improved health, I promise you! Not to mention, we're all different; our lifestyles, genetic make-up, hormones all affect the way we react to different scenarios. And honestly with that in mind, hopefully you won't be too hard on yourself too.

Animal studies have shown a promising potential of various forms of intermittent fasting, however because there isn't enough clinical evidence, and the human studies conducted are far shorter than animal ones, intermittent fasting cannot be a mainstream recommendation. So acknowledge what it can do, but be cautious, and always listen to your body.

If this is something you want to try out, here are some guidelines to keep in mind:

Number 1: Start by gradually increasing the duration and frequency of the fasting periods over the course of a few months; don't go cold turkey right away. So for myself, before I

tried out time-restricted feeding, I would usually be spending about 9 hours fasting. I then slowly stretched it to 11, 12, then 14, 15, 16...you get the idea. And it's up to you whether you decide delaying your morning meal or having earlier evening meals.

Number 2: Be mindful of the quality of your diet. Just because you're narrowing your eating window does not give you licence to eat whatever you want. It's important to make sure that you are consuming nutrient dense foods, and are still meeting your daily caloric intake. Also, make sure each meal is filled with vegetables, lean protein, complex carbohydrates, healthy fats, and get it as colourful as you can so you are getting in as many different nutrients.

And number 3: If you are pregnant, breastfeeding, under 18 years old, underweight, struggle with eating disorders, or have any medical concerns, it is recommended to refrain from intermittent fasting. And if you're unsure, consult with a nutritionist, dietitian, or doctor to see if it's appropriate for you.

And there you go, a 101 on intermittent fasting. There was so much more I wanted to share, but I thought I'd keep this more topline for starters.

If you have any questions about anything mentioned or are curious to hear more about a particular area, drop me a DM on Instagram or write in to - [hello@thecharlottemei.com](mailto:hello@thecharlottemei.com) and I'll answer them in the next episode!

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