Can Intermittent Fasting Prevent Cancer?

If done correctly, intermittent fasting is a way to limit how much you eat consistently.

Some adults fast 16 to 18 hours every day, while others fast completely for a couple of days each week. That means, all of your days' calories are consumed within one six to eight hour period.

Refraining from all food and any beverages with calories or sweeteners during fasting typically leads to a significant reduction in caloric intake. It can be a safe and effective way to manage your weight long-term without going on a crash diet or eliminating heart-healthy foods, like whole grains and fruit.

Nutritionists and researchers are finding that fasting may have additional health benefits—including cancer prevention.

“We know that 12 cancers have been linked to obesity,” says Lesley Klein M.S., RD, LD/N, a dietitian with Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center. “So, intermittent fasting can potentially lower your risk of developing cancer by helping to better manage your weight by reducing total caloric intake.”

In addition, the way that fasting affects our cells can actually hinder the development of cancer cells, according to some researchers. But, “it may also
promote their growth, depending on the stage of existing tumors,” Klein says.

**How does fasting impact cells in my body?**

Intermittent fasting can substantially deplete your glucose stores and drop your insulin levels. This reduction appears to trigger a natural cellular repair process called autophagy.

“Autophagy is important for cellular and tissue rejuvenation,” Klein says. “Since the process encourages cells to digest and remove old and dysfunctional proteins that build up inside the cells, it goes to reason that autophagy has the potential to reduce the development of cancer cells.”

“When your cells can’t or don’t initiate autophagy, bad things happen,” Klein says, including metabolic and neurodegenerative diseases and premature aging. “There are lots of studies showing other benefits of intermittent fasting and autophagy, including cardiovascular protection, type 2 diabetes risk reduction, longevity, and brain health.”

**Should I try intermittent fasting?**

If your goal is to lose some weight by restricting calories, then intermittent fasting
will probably help. However, fasting is most effective when combined with regular exercise. But it isn’t recommended for those who are underweight, have an eating disorder, are diabetic, or have kidney dysfunction.

“If I was counseling a breast cancer patient who is into Survivorship,” Klein says, “intermittent fasting could be useful for them. Often, breast cancer patients tend to gain weight from their treatment. Controlling weight during remission can help decrease a recurrence of cancer or possibly the development of a new cancer that is associated with obesity.”

**Tap into the potential for disease prevention and slowing the aging process**

Remember longer, more consistent fasting periods are most effective. Also, long-term benefits require a long-term commitment to intermittent fasting. If you jumpstart your morning with creamer in your coffee, your body will know you’ve broken your fast.

Learn about Sylvester’s nutrition counseling for patients fighting and surviving cancer.

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What is the deal with fasting?

Doctors have differing opinions on the benefits of intermittent fasting. For example, many say there is a lack of conclusive evidence.