

Therapeutic Fasting

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An Introduction to the Benefits of a Professionally Supervised Fast

When the body is provided with the requirements of health, including appropriate diet, environment, activity and psychology, optimum health can be maintained. If these requirements are not adequately provided, health will be compromised.

Often, the best means of facilitating the restoration of health is therapeutic fasting. It allows the body to create a unique physiological healing response that is unparalleled.

Therapeutic fasting is defined as the complete abstinence from all substances except pure water in an environment of complete rest.

There are no substitutes. When therapeutic fasting is indicated, nothing else can be considered "just as good."

Going without food, even for a few days, while working, exercising, worrying, etc. is not therapeutic fasting. A noisy, high stress and/or non-supportive environment will not provide the body the opportunity to maximize the self-healing mechanisms. To maximize the benefits of therapeutic fasting, complete rest is essential.

Eating only certain foods or drinking only juices is not therapeutic fasting. The physiological and clinical impact and benefits are different. This is not to say that juice diets or so-called elimination diets do not have a role. But they are not the same as therapeutic fasting.

When properly applied and conducted, therapeutic fasting is one of the most potent tools available for assisting the body in healing itself. When abused or applied injudiciously, harm can result. The most important advice I can give anyone regarding fasting is this. If you are going to undertake a fast, do it right or don't do it.

Is Fasting Indicated?

The most clear cut indication for therapeutic fasting is the lack of appetite that characterizes acute disease. When the body generates a healing crisis in acute disease, it is generally

best to eliminate the intake of food until the crisis has resolved and hunger returns. That might mean skipping a meal, or two. It might mean skipping many meals.

Fasting is extremely effective in helping the body to quickly resolve the problems that create the need for the symptoms that we know as acute disease. These symptoms include things like fever, inflammation, pain, etc. It is in acute disease that we see the most dramatic results from short term fasting.

Fasting is also effectively utilized in chronic disease. Chronic disease often has its origin in acute diseases that never resolved or were suppressed. Fasting allows the body an opportunity to generate an acute response in a chronic condition.

It is in the fasting state that the body is given the opportunity to purify its tissues, to eliminate undesirable tissue accumulations, growth, etc. It also allows the body an opportunity to let stressed and abused tissues heal.

The scientific and medical literature contains literally hundreds of papers dealing with the therapeutic use of fasting. It has been extensively used in the treatment of a variety of conditions, including obesity, diabetes, epilepsy, atherosclerotic vascular disease, congestive heart failure, cancer, autoimmune disease such as rheumatoid arthritis, psychiatric disorders including schizophrenia, and as a desensitization tool in the treatment of hypersensitivity and allergies.

Fasting is also used for what might be termed rejuvenescence. It provides an opportunity for the organism to "clean house," physically and mentally; for accumulated debris to be eliminated; and to allow for the introspection that is so often lacking in the rush of modern day life.

Contraindications

There are individuals who are not good candidates for therapeutic fasting. But there are few conditions per se that contraindicate its appropriate use.

The greatest contraindication to fasting is fear. A lack of understanding of the fasting process can present insurmountable problems. Extreme weakness in various diseases associated with muscular wasting may also contraindicate fasting.

There are numerous medications that can complicate the fasting process. Inadequate nutrient reserves would be another potential contraindication to fasting. Certain types of cancer and severe kidney disease may also make an individual a poor fasting candidate.

Professional Supervision

With proper supervision and careful clinical monitoring, therapeutic fasting is safe and effective as a means of helping the body heal itself. But as with any activity there are inherent risks. I advise anyone contemplating a therapeutic fast to consider utilizing a certified IAHP professional who is trained in its use.

The International Association of Hygienic Physicians is an association made up of primary care physicians who specialize in the supervision of therapeutic fasting. Each certified member is a licensed medical doctor, chiropractor or osteopath who has completed a minimum six-month residency program in an accredited institution specializing in therapeutic fasting.

The IAHP has established standards of practice for fasting supervision and is currently conducting fasting research. With the recent increase in number of certified professionals, a safe and effective fasting experience is more readily available than ever before.

Where to Fast

Whatever the indication for therapeutic fasting, it is essential that the individual be placed in an environment conducive to complete rest. The body needs to adjust to the fasting physiology. The importance of rest should not be underestimated. Unnecessary mobilization of nutrient reserves must be avoided.

Here again we see the benefits of fasting in a Natural Hygiene facility under the supervision of a certified IAHP professional. You will be in a setting that is designed for the purpose of providing a quiet, peaceful and emotionally supportive environment in which to fast. You will be separated from the well-meaning interference of friends and family. And you will have 24-hour access to a doctor trained and experienced in the use of fasting.

Pre-Fast Evaluation

Before therapeutic fasting is undertaken, a pre-fasting evaluation should be completed. This includes a complete health history, including an evaluation of previous illnesses, injury and treatment. An assessment is made of the current symptoms and current treatment being undertaken. A family history is also of interest.

Next, a comprehensive physical exam should be performed. Appropriate laboratory procedures such as the utilization of urinalysis or blood evaluations should also be performed.

These procedures provide the practitioner with the information needed to determine if therapeutic fasting is indicated as well as providing a base line that can be used to establish each individual's norms.

Without a good base line, it can be very difficult to differentiate a positive healing crisis from a physiological compromise. For example, a person who develops an arrhythmia on the fourteenth day of a fast might be treated very differently from an individual who starts the fast with the same condition.

How Long to Fast

Once the evaluation has been completed and it is determined that fasting is in fact indicated, the next question usually concerns the duration of the fast. How long will it last?

It should be understood that the fast itself is an important diagnostic tool in determining duration. The signs and symptoms that occur during the fast provide the trained observer with important information about the nature of the underlying conditions.

Although an experienced practitioner can estimate the length of a fast needed, none of us have crystal balls. It is important to go into the fast with a willingness to allow the body to tell us what is indicated. The idea is to fast as briefly as possible, but as long as necessary to allow the body to generate and resolve any possible healing crises that might result.

In the past, the concept of fasting "to completion" was often promoted. This meant fasting until the tongue cleared and hunger returned. But experience has shown that these factors are unreliable indicators. Some people would not develop a clear tongue even if they fasted far beyond their bodily reserves. The mere absence of hunger does not ensure that adequate reserves remain.

Understanding the Fast

The physiology of fasting has been extensively studied, and three phases of fasting have been identified.

The first phase can be called the gastrointestinal phase, and lasts approximately for first six hours following the last meal. During this phase the body uses glucose, amino acids and fats, as they are absorbed from the intestinal tract.

Phase two lasts for more or less the next two days. During this time the body will use its glycogen (sugar) reserves that are stored in the muscle and liver cells. These glycogen reserves are mobilized to provide the central nervous system, including the brain, with its normal fuel, glucose. Within a few hours the body begins to convert adipose (fat) tissue into fatty acids.

Were it not for the body's ability to switch fuels and enter phase three, where the body switches from glucose to fat metabolism, therapeutic fasting could not take place. The body's protein reserves would be quickly depleted.

Fortunately, this is not a problem. In fact, within ten hours from the last meal approximately 50% of muscle fuel is coming from fat. Even the brain itself begins to shift over the fat metabolism. The consumption of protein reserves decreases from 75 grams per day at the beginning of a fast to just 20 grams a day by the end of the second week.

As you can see, excess activity including excess emotional stress could increase the body's fuel needs, interfering with the optimum adaptation to the fasting state.

Body reserves differ from individual to individual. But a "typical" 155-pound male at normal weight has enough reserves to fast for between two to four months. If the fast were allowed to continue beyond the individual's reserves, starvation would ensue and serious damage and eventually death would occur.

Breaking the Fast

As with all aspects of fasting, proper termination of the fast is a highly individual matter. The decision to terminate a fast is based on an evaluation of numerous factors, including the patient's history, symptomatic presentation, examination results, laboratory results, as well as their psychological state and personal circumstances.

One of the characteristics of therapeutic fasting is the healing crisis. It is important to understand the healing crisis and avoid interfering with this necessary and productive process. We always try to terminate a fast during a period of stability.

Most fasts will be terminated with fresh fruits or vegetables or their juices.

After the Fast

The most important period of the fast is the initial re-feeding. Too rapid a return to food and activity can spell disaster. Materials that have been mobilized during the fast must be eliminated. Improper feeding or activity after the fast can seriously disrupt this process.

It is during the re-feeding program that good dietary and lifestyle habits are reinforced. The body must be given an opportunity to develop a preference for whole, natural foods, appropriate physical activity, etc. No matter how successful your body is at resolving problems with a fasting process, long-term dietary and life-style compliance will be necessary.

Fasting is not a cure. It is a process that facilitates the body's healing mechanisms. It is up to each individual to ensure that the requirements of health are provided on a continuing basis.

People who succeed with Natural Hygiene are those who cooperate long enough that they feel so good that "feeling good" becomes their motivation. Lifestyle changes based on discipline alone or coupled with negative motivation such as fear of pain, disease or death will only last so long. But the ecstasy of optimal health is lasting.

Summary

Therapeutic fasting means taking pure water while ensuring complete physical and emotional rest. This unique process maximizes the healing potential of the body, allowing it to "clean house" and quickly restore a state of higher health.

Therapeutic fasting should be supervised by a properly trained hygienic doctor and should be followed by appropriate dietary and lifestyle modifications.

When properly implemented, therapeutic fasting is extremely effective in creating an internal environment in which the body can do what it does best - heal itself.