

Episode 30 – My Intermittent Fasting Experiment and Tips for Following Your Meal Plan

This is the TD Fitness podcast with Coach T, episode number 30.

Welcome to the TD Fitness podcast, giving you ways to live a healthy lifestyle without giving up the things that make life worth living and now your host certified health coach and personal trainer, Coach T.

What's up, guys? Coach T here coming back at you this time with episode number 30. In this episode I'm going to talk about my intermittent fasting experiment and give you some tips on following your own meal plan. There's a lot of chatter about intermittent fasting so I hope to clarify a bit through my 12-week experiment with it. This isn't just an intermittent fasting episode. I wanted to broaden the topic to the way we eat and that's because the way we eat influences so much of how we feel. The way we live influences how we eat. We're going to talk about dieting and meal plans today. I'll provide a few tips for your consideration.

Let's start with intermittent fasting. What is it? What did I do in my fasting efforts and I want to give you some of my observations with that. Intermittent fasting is essentially the practice of occasionally going for extended periods without eating. It means a lot of different things to different people and it's not really anything new. It's not a magical approach to weight loss and it's not for some elite group of nutrition experts. We all do some form of intermittent fasting everyday. We call it sleeping.

Now there are many ways to fast. You could go a day on, day off. I've seen all of these techniques. You could do 12 hours each day. There's a five to two ratio they have where you consume 500 to 600 calories for two days a week and then whatever you want on the other days of the week. Maybe you'll have no breakfast on some days just caffeine drinks, unsweetened, things like that like green tea. It curbs your appetite. You could have your first meal at 10 o'clock, your last meal at 6:00 PM. There are so many ways to go about this.

As I think about it, it's really similar to interval training. There aren't really any wrong ways to do it. You essentially mix intensity with rest when you perform intervals, right? Well here, you mix fasting periods with periods where you're not fasting, where you can eat. You do what you can and push yourself in a way that you can handle. It's very easy to cater it to you.

I can't speak to the validity or the difficulty of the different types of fasting or the different approaches to fasting that I mentioned but I can tell you what I did. If you remember at the beginning of the year in episode number 16, I talked about some of my new habits for the new year and one of those was to try to see just how I feel when going without breakfast for a while. I found that what I was doing was eating breakfast out of a habit not because I was hungry. I tried that for a while and essentially that

meant I was fasting for about 12 hours each day from the time I stopped eating the night before until the next day. It happened to be at least 12 hours every day. Then during Lent, I decided to step it up a little bit. I was like, "Well, I've been doing 12 hours every day. Let me see just how far I can go with this and really push myself for a number of reasons spiritually, mentally, physically, and from an education standpoint." I wanted to see what would happen.

What I did was the first couple of weeks, the first two weeks of Lent I fasted for 13 hours everyday. The next two weeks, I increased that to 14 hours, again, everyday. The next week, I did for 15 hours and the final week of Lent I fasted for 16 hours every single day. Now I'll give you some of the results and some of my observations from that. Like I said, for me, it had a mental, a physical and a spiritual aspect to it and there were aspects that I learned in each one of those domains. Spiritually, I absolutely had or gained more of an appreciation for sacrifice and going without. I typically hadn't made any type of significant efforts in previous years during the Easter season to sacrifice in that regard. I felt that was something that I absolutely was a benefit to me. It's something I learned through fasting.

Then like any diet, when it comes to the mental and physical side of things, intermittent fasting or any type of approach to changing your diet, it makes you pay a little more attention to what and when you're eating and that's a good thing. It certainly caused me to think about what I eat and drink. For example, I'm a chai tea kind of guy and that is a sweeter drink maybe not as sweet as some of the very sweetened coffee drinks or tea drinks but I found that I thought about whether or not I actually needed that for example in the morning. Many times I would have just black coffee if I drank any caffeine at all. I'm not really one to have to have caffeine everyday but there are some days that I like to have caffeine. I would just have black coffee maybe with a little bit of honey or a little bit of a cream or milk in it.

Fasting also caused me to cut out the excess sugary drinks throughout the day. Again, I'm not the kind of person that drinks a lot of soda or anything like that but again when those situations come up, if you go to a restaurant or something and you want a sweet tea or a soda with your meal, again it's something that you think about because you're in the mindset of fasting even though you're not fasting at that particular moment. For me, the fasting helped also cut out night time snacking and that was a huge benefit for me because I consumed fewer calories.

It was definitely beneficial in the sense that I would literally calculate or try to calculate the amount of time that I would have to go without eating. After I finished dinner, say it's 6:30 at night, I look at my watch and I'm like, "Okay, I can't eat until," if I was on a 14-hour a week, "I couldn't eat until 8:30 the next day". If I had something at 9:00, a snack, watching TV or something with my wife then that reset my clock and that was another 14 hours. I was very cognizant of that so that has a tendency to cut the night time snacking and nip that in the bud because you want to finish up earlier, finish your eating earlier rather than later.

As one of the points of feedback that I've heard from intermittent fasting when people who do it, they do the long fasts like the 24 hours and things like that was energy levels tend to drop. I'll tell you my energy levels seemed fine throughout although I didn't do an extremely long fast. Again, I stuck to a max of 16 hours. I would say that during some of the longer fast like that last week, the 16 hour fasts, I found that those were about my limit when you're talking doing it on a daily basis. I tend to get a little bit cranky around the 16-hour point. On one occasion, I seem to have a headache that could have been attributed to some dehydration, maybe. But, my mental acuity, my performance all seemed fine. My energy levels did not tend to seem to drop at all.

It also helped me to at least feel like I was in better control of my life when it came to nutrition. I didn't feel bound by hunger instead I felt like that was something that I can control and that is very empowering so a definite benefit in that regard. I didn't find that 12 to 16 hours of fasting was overly restrictive either. It didn't inhibit me from going out and having fun or having dinner with friends and things like that. I just had to plan for it and understand that if I stayed out late or went to a late movie with my wife and we had a snack then it was later in the day, probably not until after lunch that I could eat the next day and that was okay.

I also found that the hunger pangs subside after a while and I had read this. You maybe hungry when you wake up in the morning or midway through the morning before lunch, before you eat but that hunger actually goes away. It's a temporary feeling and that gets to some of the psychological versus the physical hunger that I'll talk about here in a little bit.

The million dollar question that I think everybody wonders is, "Does it work and specifically does it work for weight loss?" I'll tell you, I'll give it a soft yes and here's the reason I say that. I definitely noticed more definition in my abdominal region, definitely more defined there and I actually measured myself and my tape measurement was smaller than it was about a year before ... same time of year doing the same time period if you will. I could definitely see the definition in my abs.

The question is, "Why? Why did that work if it was indeed the fasting that did it?" Was it because of a restricted calorie input? Maybe partly, but for me it's also I believe because of the insulin response that we talked about in episode number 29. Remember your hormones play such a huge role in weight gain, weight loss, weight maintenance. Because there weren't spikes, there weren't as many spikes throughout the day and night due to me taking in food that tended to have a lowering effect on insulin levels. I believe. I did not do blood work so this is all just my observation but I tend to believe that that is part of what's going on. Again, like I brought up earlier there was also an increased awareness of my diet in general. Because you're in this period of fasting over the course of a number of weeks or months, you are less apt to forget about the food that you're consuming. It's more in the forefront. You have fitness, health and fasting on the mind even if it's not in the forefront. That causes an increased awareness and that again is a good thing.

Also, I'll tell you what else I was eating. During the day, on most days where I went to work and worked throughout the day and then came home that was a majority of the days over the three-month period. I did a little bit of travel but mainly I was putting in regular work days. There is a salad shop right by where I work and I love that place. Everyday for lunch, I was eating a salad and it was a pretty big salad I'll tell you but it was a salad nonetheless. The point is when you consider the fact that I essentially wasn't eating much of anything during the morning, sometimes on the shorter fasting periods I would have an apple or something like that. Then I have a salad for lunch and maybe some almonds as a snack midday. That was it until dinner. Then when you cut out the things after dinner, no snacking, you're probably going to lose weight, right?

I'll tell you too though that my workout efforts did suffer. I don't think because of the fasting but just because it was such a busy time in my life. The past three months have been very busy. That is something to consider particularly when we think about the fact that it's hard to make large changes in your lifestyle when it comes to diet and exercise. It's hard to make multiple changes at the same time. It could be, I haven't thought about it until now actually but it could be that because I was focused, my attention was focused on the fasting piece, I just didn't have the bandwidth to stay consistent with my exercising. That's something to consider, too. That's one of the things we talk about from a health

coaching perspective. You want to pick a time where when it comes to making changes in your life, you want to pick a time where you're not overly stressed and you don't want to try to make too many changes at the same time.

One thing I will say about the fasting is that again, it required planning and that is hard for many of us. I am a planner by personality type, by career, by training. All I do is plan in my personal and professional life. My wife will tell you that and I understand that that is not everyone's thing. Not everyone is a planner but that is absolutely something that I found I had to consider when it comes to intermittent fasting. Like I said, it's not for everyone particularly pregnant women, those with medical conditions such as diabetes or eating disorders, females in general. You need to be careful with intermittent fasting if you're going to do this. If you're highly stressed, if you're obese, those are some situations where you may want to seek professional advice before embarking on any kind of fasting protocol. Seek out a registered dietitian maybe even a physician. They might be able to help you out there, too.

If you are thinking about doing it, here's some things to consider. You should choose a fasting regimen that best fits your lifestyle and your health history and your ability to sustain the fast. Again, this is about you. Don't try to take someone else's model and plug and play and stick it in your life because it's going to be hard and it probably won't work. If you don't think you can fast for 24 hours twice a week then don't try to do that just because somebody else did it. If you can only go eight hours and that's better than what you're doing now, if you're trying intermittent fasting, then go for it.

Secondly, protein and fiber-rich foods are going to help to keep you feel full and satiated and satisfied. That's important particularly when your calories are limited. Healthy fats like nuts, peanut butter, those things also curb your hunger but understand that they provide more calories as well but the healthy fats in the peanut butters the polyunsaturated fats, those types of things those aren't bad for you. Again, calories aren't bad so it's okay to consume some of those things.

Adequate hydration is key and that is something that I did maintain. I've been very consistent with my water intake. I have a 33-ounce water container here that I carry with me. I have a couple of other ones too and I just try to drink three of those a day. That gets me about a hundred ounces a day and that keeps me pretty well hydrated. Also, when you're fasting you don't want to compensate with junk food. You don't want to defeat the purpose of your fasting ingest or take in a lot of stuff that's bad for you so just keep that in mind.

Realize too that hunger is not an emergency. Sometimes we think it is but it's not really. There is the physical hunger and the psychological hunger and this is what I alluded to a while ago. When I was young, I remember when I was a small child I used to tell my dad, "Dad, I'm hungry. Can I eat?" My father's response was always, "Son, you don't know what hunger is." I didn't understand what he was saying then. Now I understand what he's saying. I mean there are people in the world that are literally hungry. What we typically experience, what I have typically experienced is that I wanted to eat but I wasn't necessarily hungry. A lot of times when people think they're hungry, they're not experiencing that true physiological hunger, which is through your body but rather it's a psychological or a hunger that's in your head. It's important to know the difference in that and important to understand your body's signals in that regard. Even when I was doing the intermittent fasting, I'll say that that was all primarily in my head. That wasn't true hunger, that was just me wanting to eat.

The takeaway is that intermittent fasting can be good but I don't think it's necessary for everyone and maybe not even necessary to lose weight. There are so many other approaches that you can follow when it comes to a healthy diet for your lifestyle. I'll continue to do the intermittent fasting though because I did like the way I felt. I liked the extra definition and I thought that it was something that was doable. Again, it kept nutrition on the forefront of my mind. I'm not going to go the 16-hour route but what I'm going to try to do is 14-hour fast on five days of the week. That seems to be what's working for me right now. It may not work for you though but here are some things to consider with dieting or following a meal plan in general. Your approach to dieting if you will, doesn't have to be fasting. Like I said I want to zoom out a little bit and talk a little bit, bigger picture about some of the other concepts, some of the other things to consider here.

The first consideration is that no matter how motivated you are, it can be tough to follow a diet or a meal plan. I want you to know that that is normal because life gets in the way and you don't want your meal plan to prevent you from enjoying life. If you look at it as a way to enhance your lifestyle or to gradually change your lifestyle for the better that's a little bit easier to chew on, right? Yes, that's pun intended. Think about what you're already eating, though and how you can make that a little bit better. That's what I love about our registered dietitian partners over at Better Nutrition, they talk about better not perfect, better not best.

The second consideration I want you to think about is that most of the meal plans and diets on the market aren't developed with sustainability in mind. They're intended to get quick results so that they will sell. The short-term approach does not really bode well for us in the long-term. The most effective diets though are the long-term way of life type of diets, the ones that are ongoing. The ones that include support systems along the way. Those are the ones with the longer view in mind and that's what I would steer you towards. In order to make a sustainable change, the changes really need to be small and based on what you're already doing. Taking small steps from where you are right now. Making small changes and improvements to what you already normally eat and already enjoy. Again, just one small step at a time. Don't look at eating healthier as black and white like, "I can't do this anymore. I have to do this now." Think of it as a spectrum of healthier options and less healthy options and then just try to move the scale further along to the healthier end.

The third consideration I want to bring up is another way to think about it is to get rid of the meal plan or the diet term altogether. People define diet in many different ways. When I refer to diet, dieting, I typically mean the way that you eat now. If I say you should improve your diet that means you should improve the way you eat. It doesn't necessarily mean go buy one of the diets on the market. The meal plan implies that it's temporary really no one wants to follow a meal plan forever. It's physically difficult and psychologically difficult if you're on a diet, the traditional definition of a diet or a meal plan then that's fine. Just understand that it has a greater role in your life and it's really a long-term view that you want to take.

Most importantly though I want you to figure out how to fit your way of eating or your diet into your life not the other way around. When we try to change our lifestyles and schedules to fit around a meal plan, we are figuratively biting off more than we can chew. There's another diet pun for you. It's full of those in this episode, huh? But, seriously, imagine yourself trying to alter your life to fit around a diet. I mean people do it all the time and wonder why it's so hard to stick to it, right?

No, here's what I want you to do. Make small changes in what you're doing now and build on that. That's how you incorporate long-term health change. I gradually stepped up my intermittent

fasting efforts for example from 12 to 13 to 14 to 15 to 16 hours and I understood the 15 and 16 hours that was a bit much so I scaled it back to 14. That's what I'm going to maintain going forward. Intermittent fasting is something I feel like I can sustain. We can call it intermittent fasting but now it's just a normal part of my routine. On five days a week, again, I'll limit my diet to the 10 hours of intake and 14 hours of fasting and that's a general guideline that I intend to follow based on what I've learned from my little experiment. It won't control my life but it provides some structure and I feel like without structure or a framework to bounce up against we flounder. Again, that's an example of taking something and making it fit to your life but not trying to bend your life around this pattern that you feel like you have to follow.

Some of the practical steps if you will for implementing or improving your diet. Number one, I mentioned it already, start small, one step at a time. Pick one habit to focus on for just a limited period of time. Some of the examples I used from the Fit Life Program that I provide, drink more water, consume fruits and vegetables, control your calorie intake, increase your fiber intake, your healthy protein intake, and limit things like unhealthy fats, processed foods, added sugars, extra sodium, and control your portion sizes. Those are all some of the examples of small habits that you can focus on in the short-term again, one at a time to start to improve your dietary practices.

You also want to add changes slowly. You want to be patient. When you do that, you'll start to understand what is easier for you and what's harder and then continue to build on those things that are easier and then take the slower road on the things that are harder. Don't try to force yourself again to do something that's extremely hard. Make that hard thing easier or take a longer time to reach the goal of that hard change you're trying to make. Remember everything is hard though before it's easy so just do what works for you.

Then finally, I'll tell you to enjoy your food. We tend to get wrapped around all the things we can and can't do and what we should and shouldn't eat, just enjoy it. Food is meant to be enjoyed. It's meant to be an experience, a shared experience. Many cultures view it that way. We tended to get away from that in the American culture but I do want you to enjoy it.

Now, as I wrap up if you are considering a new approach to eating that fits your lifestyle then here are a couple of tips. Number one, decide if it's something you want to do. I mean really think about it, okay? Next, ease your way into it and then number three, give it time and make sure you pick the right time when you're not overly stressed and make sure you have a support system in place to help you through that. Those are the four things. Decide if it's something you want to do, ease your way into it, give it time to work, and make sure you pick the right time and support system.

I'll leave you with a couple of final thoughts. We often go about changing our diet based on what we think we know. We think we're consuming too many calories because everyone tells us that we need to consume fewer calories to lose weight. That may be partly true. Remember episode number 28, where we talked about calories and weight loss but diet and nutrition are about more than calories. It's about more than weight loss, too. If you want ground truth on what's right for you nutritionally speaking, a registered dietitian is the only professional that can do that for you. That's the reason why I've partnered with registered dietitians to get you to where you need to be in the safest manner possible. You can head over to tdfitness.net/betternutrition and it'll take you to the Better Nutrition page. There Ashley, Rachel and they have a host of resources for you. Some are free. Some are paid but in the paid ones even you get a 20% discount with the TD Fitness code so go ahead and check that out.

The next, you know I'm a big picture guy and as I zoom out and look at what I've been telling you and how it fits into what I want to provide for you holistically and overall and more importantly though how all of that fits into your overall approach to live healthier, I look at it and these past few episodes have focused heavily, almost exclusively on nutrition. That's for a number of reasons partly because you've told me that nutrition is what's important to you so I want to honor that. Partly because last month was National Nutrition Month so I wanted some focus there and because really I think it's a vitally important topic when it comes to health and fitness.

When things like nutrition get a lot of attention, it's easy to assume that they're complicated or that they're difficult but it's important to understand that nutrition is key but I don't want you to get yourself in a frenzy over some perceived difficulty with healthy eating. Believe it or not you are doing a lot of things right. I don't know if you've even heard that before but you are. I can guarantee you so build on those things and simply address the areas where you need a little bit of improvement. It's really that simple. Don't beat yourself up over it. Don't try to be perfect. In fact, I'll go so far as to say that you should deliberately plan times that you don't have to be perfect.

Thinking back to episode number nine, the concept from the rest and recovery episode where I talked about periodic pauses. In the military, we call that a strategic pause so deliberately planning those times that you don't have to be perfect, that's fine. Everybody needs a break. That doesn't mean to go off the reservation. Don't get crazy with it but live life. Understand that it's normal to have ups and downs, accept that, get over it, forgive yourself, and then get back to your healthy habits. That's what it's all about. Consistency over time, not perfection all the time. I'm going to leave you with that, okay?

The show notes for this episode can be found at tdfitness.net/030 and there you can listen, you can watch, you can read and grab the transcript. You'll find links to all of the references from this episode. As always, thank you all so much for tuning in and for your time. I want you to have a blessed one. Coach T, out.